

Richard Rorty's Anti-Representationalism: A Critical Study

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Abstract

In this study I argue that Richard Rorty's anti-representationalist philosophy arises from a misguided belief that realists are compelled to argue that we need a single and exclusive "mirror-like" form of representation to capture reality. I argue that Rorty fails to appreciate the fact that realists do not have to absolutely identify reality with a particular mirror-like representation of it and nor do they have to fall prey to an invidious distinction between reality and the various ways that we do represent it. I argue that we need not associate realism with the kind of absolutism that Rorty associates it with. To illustrate this I challenge Rorty's attempt to claim that Nietzsche also rejects realism and interpret Nietzsche's perspectivism as a form of realism. I also challenge Rorty's anti-representationalism in the context of his political philosophy. In order to do this I assess the role that Rorty assigns to the poet in his liberal utopia by examining the work of Sylvia Plath and Tony Harrison. I also discuss the various positions that Hilary Putnam has adopted in order to explore different possibilities within realism and representationalism. I conclude that Putnam's internal realism concedes too much to Rorty and that his earlier external realism is a better alternative.

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Introduction

Hilary Putnam has said that it is the besetting sin of philosophers to throw the baby out with the bathwater.¹ By this he means that each new philosophical movement is often so antithetical to the last that any kernel of truth that might be carried over is continually lost. Over the central issue of realism we swing back and forth from some version of antirealism and appear incapable of capturing the whole truth in a single vision. This study of Richard Rorty is, to a large extent, a description of this pattern of recoil. This is not to diminish Rorty's contribution to the debate. Rorty has done a lot to convince us of the contingency of many of our philosophical convictions. Indeed, it is his refreshing determination to pull the plug on some of the least helpful that advances the debate and draws many to his writing. The problem is that some of this old metaphysical bathwater distorts his own vision to the extent that he ends up advocating something very close to idealism. Rorty describes himself as a pragmatist philosopher so by way of introduction I would like to say something about this connection. To my mind the defining attribute of Rorty's position is his anti-representationalism - which is his claim that our beliefs and our language do not represent anything. This assertion can be traced back to its roots in pragmatism by considering how that movement was characterized by a suspicion of certain metaphors that we tritely employ when describing the relationship that our true beliefs have to reality.

¹ Putnam, Hilary, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

In his lectures on pragmatism from 1906, William James argued that our true ideas are not always a straightforward copy of reality but are often an approximation that allows us to summarize our experiences and “get about among them by conceptual short-cuts”. A true idea is any one “upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor”.² The truth is not bound to reality with the fidelity that might be expected by those who imply its mirror-like correspondence because our more conceptual (as opposed to “sensible”) ideas do not copy their object. Our concepts comprise a kind of shorthand for practical purposes and they often bear a loose resemblance to reality. The term “concept” itself, for example, is a metaphor at root. It is more like an imprecise tool than a copy or reflection of reality. For Rorty, the metaphor of tool-use offers an alternative to the whole tradition of representationalist philosophy. Rorty sees in this metaphor a way to dissolve the debate between realism and scepticism. According to him, it is the whole nest of metaphors to do with mirroring that creates the debate in the first place. The solution is to train ourselves not to use those metaphors. By regarding our language as a set of tools (rather than representations) we can shake off the debate between realism and scepticism. Rorty regards the standard of realism to be unrealisable anyway because (with James) he claims that it is hard to make sense of the idea that our beliefs are mirror-like copies of reality.

Of all the terms and contexts that can be used to characterise Rorty’s philosophical position this study will treat Rorty as principally an “anti-representationalist”. That term encapsulates the fundamental point of departure that

² William James, “What Pragmatism Means” in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 27-44, p. 34.

motivated the disillusionment with the philosophical tradition that he announced so provocatively with the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979. His arguments in favour of pragmatism, postmodernism, anti-realism and ethnocentrism all flow from that point of departure. For Rorty, the whole notion of representation - used by philosophers to describe our epistemic relationship to reality – is inherently flawed and ought to be abandoned. With that notion goes the idea that our beliefs can ever “correspond” to reality. According to Rorty, it is not possible for us to make sense of such correspondence. All philosophical attempts to do so (stretching all the way back to Plato) are incoherent and rely on an idealised conception of the mind as a “mirror” that reflects reality without imposing its own stamp. My criticism of Rorty’s work will largely concentrate on the reasoning that he offers in support of these claims. It is a feature of Rorty’s style that he often enlists the arguments of others while re-contextualising those arguments in order to bring them into line with his own. He sees himself as justified in doing so precisely because he denies any obligation to accurately represent the kind of original authorial intention that might restrict him. Much of my work will involve recovering that original authorial intention. One thinker who will play a prominent role in this work is Friedrich Nietzsche. Rorty presents Nietzsche’s thought as if it largely confirms the anti-realist conclusions of his own argument. Rorty’s interpretation of Nietzsche takes his early unpublished essay “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” as a summation of Nietzsche’s account of our relationship to reality. I will show that subsequent developments in Nietzsche’s thought belie this claim. Nietzsche developed some crucial arguments to the effect that we can reject the idealised conception of realism that Rorty rejects without abandoning realism and

representationalism.

Over the course of this study I will refer to various pieces of Rorty's writing that span the period from 1972 to 2007 but I will treat Rorty's work during this time as a consistent argument. The focus of my criticism will be Rorty's narrow conceptions of realism and representationalism and those conceptions do not change significantly. Rorty's writing goes through changes of context and terminology as he develops his argument and extends its applications but its core claims remain the same. The ideas of realism and representationalism that Rorty casts off have their roots in Plato's allegory of the cave and that allegory remains canonical for Rorty. Plato imagined the mind transcending the contingencies of the practice of representation and achieving absolute "mirror-like" correspondence with reality through contemplation of the Forms. Whenever Rorty defines realism he does so in terms that hark back this ideal of absolute correspondence. As far as Rorty is concerned, realism is forever compromised by our inability to achieve the kind of realism that Plato described. As long as we remain "cave-bound" it is better to reject Plato's picture altogether and deny that our thought is intended to represent reality in the first place. Plato's picture is central to Rorty's conception of realism and I question Rorty's adherence to it in the various contextual and terminological guises in which it appears in his work. My intention is to explore a less absolutist conception of realism in order to show that we can accommodate the sense of contingency that Rorty wisely imparts on us without abandoning realism.

Rorty often states that philosophical argument revolves around competing incompatible descriptions of the world. According to Rorty, it is wrong to think that argument takes place against the background of a shared objective conception of the

world that we all naturally assent to. Much of our argument involves the attempt to persuade each other of the virtues of our particular description of the world and we do not have an overriding objective viewpoint that we can use to demonstrate our accuracy. Our arguments in favour of our particular description of the world often do not rely on our accuracy. They often rely on other virtues such as increased coherence, practical efficacy or even hopefulness. Rorty's own argument is intended to persuade us of the virtues of a world in which realism and objectivity are no longer sought. Rorty advocates an inversion of the epistemic hierarchy that Plato describes in *The Republic*. For Rorty, it is those who are able to create persuasive pictures of the world that are most valued. There is no room for the philosopher who attempts to transcend contingency. Such "metaphysical" philosophy is based on a misguided view of the mind as a mirror that can reflect the intrinsic nature of reality. Rorty tries to elevate the role of creative art in his utopia and claims that literature is a more legitimate form of argument than metaphysics because it does not rely on a dubious claim to objectivity. Literature often deals with more contingent matters and can record our everyday lives while exploring matters of philosophical import. As a student of literature I can appreciate the value that Rorty finds in it. Rorty is right to acknowledge that art is a valid form of critique. In order to honour this interdisciplinary spirit I have chosen to use the work of two poets in order to present criticism of Rorty's vision of a poeticised liberal utopia. In his political philosophy Rorty makes the literary artist the prime advocate of his liberal outlook. In response I offer some literary voices that suggest Rorty's utopian liberal vision is more problematic than he suggests.

This strategy of sticking close to the argumentative framework that Rorty

offers is also evident in the way that I focus my discussion on philosophers that Rorty also discusses. Much of Rorty's argument is couched in the form of exposition. He identifies what he calls a "holist and pragmatist trend" in contemporary analytic and continental philosophy that he believes his own anti-representationalism reflects. Rorty acknowledges that his expositions often take licence with their original source material and so it is instructive to consider what is lost as a result of Rorty's manipulations. Once again, Rorty's highly specific conceptions of realism and representationalism inform his argument. Rorty precludes any realist interpretation of philosophers who depart from the kind of Platonic absolutism that he associates with realism. This is evident in his treatment of major influences such as Thomas Kuhn, Donald Davidson, W. V. O Quine, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hilary Putnam and Jacques Derrida. I discuss these figures while questioning the narrow interpretative parameters that Rorty offers. I do not spend much time discussing subsequent developments in contemporary philosophy because my aim is to concentrate on exposing the internal weaknesses of Rorty's work. One contemporary philosopher that I do discuss is Roy Bhaskar. An important feature of the realist school of thought that Bhaskar founded is its accommodation of the sense of contingency that Rorty regards as being anathema to realism. It is an important development in light of my criticism of Rorty because it shows how realism can proceed once the narrow terms that Rorty sets for it have been shaken off.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter I will explore Rorty's account of what representationalism is and examine the line of argument that leads him to reject it. Rorty's description of what a representation must be like is often highly specific. It is often based on the metaphor of the "mirror" and conceives of the standard of correspondence as a demand for an identical copy or "likeness" of reality. Rorty's pragmatist description of language as a tool (as opposed to a representation) is in large part motivated by the lack of the mirror-like identity relation that philosophers have often presupposed exists between our language and reality. My counter-argument will bear down on Rorty's narrow account of what a representation must be like and suggest that it can be widened to include un-mirror-like things, one of which is language. One of the implications of Rorty's narrow conception of what a representation must be like is that he interprets realism as a demand for a representation that is identical to reality in an absolute sense. This would be a reflection of the way reality is "as it is in itself" unmarked by the form and contingency of representations. According to Rorty, our inability to attain such an absolute conception of reality creates a distinction between appearance and reality that invites universal scepticism. It is this universal scepticism that Rorty seeks to dissolve by denying that our language is intended to correspond to reality "as it is in itself". In this respect, Rorty's anti-realism has much in common with Kant's idealism. The purpose of showing this is to illustrate the fact that Rorty's rejection of realism and representationalism draws on the very arguments that it seeks to dissolve. Rather than challenging the terms of the debate between realism and scepticism, Rorty ultimately merely uses the problem of scepticism as justification for his anti-

representationalism. I finish off the chapter by arguing that Rorty's dogmatic conception of what philosophical realism commits us to has roots in an association that he makes between realism and Platonism. Rorty interprets philosophical realism as an attempt to reduce our representations of reality down to a single, essential and absolute representation as if all other ways of representing reality must then be treated as mere appearance. I begin to suggest that a less reductionist and less absolutist form of realism is a better alternative to Rorty's form of anti-representationalism.

In the second chapter I introduce Nietzsche into the debate. I start by offering an account of Nietzsche's intellectual career that illustrates the partial nature of the reading that Rorty offers. Rorty presents the argument of Nietzsche's early essay "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense" as a summation of Nietzsche's thinking on the subjects of realism and representationalism. The argument of the early Nietzsche is similar to Rorty's because it also interprets realism as a wish to transcend the contingencies involved in the practice of representation. I try to show that Nietzsche was not content with the idea of a dichotomy between appearance and reality for very long. Nietzsche went a long way towards conceiving of a relationship between appearance and reality that does not invite Rorty's variety of scepticism. Nietzsche's perspectivism is a form of realism that refuses to portray reality as something that belies appearances. According to the later Nietzsche, reality appears in our representations despite the contingency of those representations. In this chapter, I also compare Nietzsche's earlier argument with the argument that W.V.O Quine puts forward in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". Quine is another figure that Rorty enlists in his rejection of realism and representationalism and comparing Quine's arguments to the early Nietzsche's helps to illustrate the narrow terms on which Rorty's rejection

of realism and representationism is based. At this point I introduce Donald Davidson's criticisms of Quine in order to put pressure on these narrow terms. Davidson casts doubt on the claim that the act of conceptualisation must always be treated as something that makes reality remote and mysterious.

In chapter three I consider the central position that Rorty's theory of metaphor has in his account of our intellectual and cultural life. Rorty draws on the account of metaphor that Nietzsche gives in "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense" in order to undermine the priority and authority that is traditionally given to literal uses of language. According to Rorty, it is the creation of inventive metaphors that explains our intellectual advances. We do not advance by achieving ever more accurate literal descriptions of reality. Rorty denies that our literal uses of language accurately represent reality. He argues that they are just metaphors that we no longer regard as metaphors. The purpose of arguing for the ubiquity of metaphor is to deny that our language is intended to be realistic. Our language is always characterised by an act of contrivance that compromises its absolute, mirror-like realism. Rorty elaborates his theory of metaphor using what he claims to be a Davidsonian account of the difference between the literal and the metaphorical. Davidson argues that metaphors have no meaning other than the literal interpretation that we give them. Rorty interprets this claim as a belief that metaphors impact our language by changing what we take to be literally meaningful. According to Rorty, our intellectual advances occur as a result of such "acts of imagination" and not as a result of coming to represent reality accurately. I seek to challenge Rorty's reading of Davidson in order to confront Rorty's insistence that a belief in the importance of metaphor must put us at odds with realism. I then argue that Rorty's notion of the unrealistic nature of

metaphor is further evidence of the debt that his argument owes to a Platonic conception of realism. In order to challenge this conception of realism I consider Aristotle's theory of metaphor as an alternative. I also draw out some of the positive consequences of entertaining a less absolutist conception of realism and representationalism as an alternative to Rorty's anti-representationalism.

In the fourth chapter I consider Rorty's account of metaphor as it relates to his theory of personal identity and his denial of the idea that we share a common human nature. I explain Rorty's account of individual autonomy which he describes as an achievement that is attained through a practice of "self-creation". According to Rorty, the autonomous individual has to create new metaphors that carve out a distinct identity that is free from the hegemony of conventional "literal" self-descriptions. Rorty conceives of such autonomy as something that not everyone can achieve. It is only "strong poets" who are able to "use words as they have never been used" in order to confound received ideas of who they can be. Rorty recognises that this individualism might cause a problem to a society that seeks to promote solidarity on the basis of shared values. In order to solve this problem Rorty insists on a separation between the private and the public spheres. I offer an example of the project of self-creation - through an interpretation of the poetry of Sylvia Plath - in order to explore the plausibility of this separation. I also examine Rorty's denial of the reality of a common human nature and offer doubts about our ability to maintain solidarity given that denial. In the absence of a real common human nature Rorty places great emphasis on the role of the creative artist in the creation and maintenance of a sense of solidarity. With this in mind, I also enlist the work of Tony Harrison in order to assess the central role that Rorty gives to the poet in his liberal utopia.

In the final chapter I seek to elaborate further the less absolutist form of representationalism and realism that I regard as a better alternative to Rorty's anti-representationalism. In order to do this I enlist the help of Hilary Putnam. The various positions that Putnam has developed over the course of his philosophical career (from his early external realism to his later internal realism and more recent commonsense or natural realism) offer a basis on which to explore various different possibilities within realism and representationalism. Putnam's internal realism, for example, has much in common with Rorty's anti-realism because it also seeks an alternative to the kind of absolutist realism that is the counterpart of scepticism. I argue, however, that Putnam's internal realism is too close to Rorty's position. Putnam agrees with Rorty that a rejection of metaphysical realism requires a rejection of the idea that our descriptions of reality can capture reality's intrinsic nature. According to both philosophers, the idea that our descriptions are able to capture reality's intrinsic nature must be abandoned once we have acknowledged the contingencies that determine our descriptions. I argue that this claim is based on a narrow conception of what capturing the intrinsic nature of reality must be like – a conception that is taken from the metaphysical realism that they seek to avoid. I claim that we need not conceive of the intrinsic nature of reality as something that belies our representations. The intrinsic nature of reality is something that can appear in those representations despite the contingency of those representations. On this basis I argue that Putnam's earlier external realism has more to recommend it as a basis for conceiving of a form of philosophical realism that escapes the kind of absolutism that invites scepticism.

So far, in this summary, I have sometimes prefixed the terms "realism" and

“representationalism” with the term “philosophical”. This is in acknowledgement of the fact that Rorty does not deny that the concepts of realism and representation have ordinary senses that are perfectly acceptable. It is precisely the philosophical “mystification” (to use Alan Malachowski’s term) of such concepts that Rorty objects to. This is something that Malachowski emphasizes in his book *The New Pragmatism* in order to defend Rorty against those who accuse him of reinforcing the scepticism that he seeks to dissolve.³ For example, Malachowski takes Putnam to task for the following accusation levelled against Rorty:

What I want to emphasize is that Rorty moves from a conclusion about the unintelligibility of metaphysical realism (we cannot have a guarantee – of the sort that doesn’t even make sense – that our words represent things outside themselves) to scepticism about the possibility of representation *tout court*. [...] Failing to inquire into the unintelligibility which vitiates metaphysical realism, Rorty remains blind to the way in which his own rejection of metaphysical realism partakes of the same unintelligibility. The way in which scepticism is the flip side of a craving for an unintelligible kind of certainty (a senseless craving, one might say, but for all that a deeply human craving) has rarely been more sharply illustrated than by Rorty’s complacent willingness to give up on the (platitudinous) idea that language can be used to represent something outside language. While I agree with Rorty that metaphysical realism is unintelligible, to stop with that point without going on to recover our ordinary notion of

³ Alan Malachowski, *The New Pragmatism* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), pp. 92-95.

representation (and of a world of things to be represented) is to fail to complete that journey “from the familiar to the familiar” that is the true task of philosophy.⁴

In response to Putnam, Malachowski argues that it is wrong to think that Rorty’s anti-representationalism is equivalent to scepticism because doing so implies that Rorty takes our philosophical “craving for an unintelligible kind of certainty” seriously. It is precisely such a craving for certainty that Rorty seeks to deflate by treating realism and representationalism (and philosophy in general) as optional. The problem with this defence of Rorty is that it does not challenge the implication that the mystification of our ordinary concepts is something that philosophy cannot avoid. Despite his respect for the ordinary uses of terms like “realism” and “representation” Rorty seems to exclude philosophy from ever making sense of them. Rorty suggests that so long as we do representationalist philosophy we are committed to either absolutism or scepticism. It seems to me that Putnam is correct when he admonishes Rorty for “failing to inquire into the unintelligibility which vitiates metaphysical realism”.⁵ This failure is the reason that Rorty’s anti-representationalist response frustrates people like Putnam. The purpose of my thesis is to inquire into this unintelligibility and explore the possibility of arriving at a more intelligible account of representation and realism.

⁴ Hilary Putnam, “Realism Without Absolutes” in *Words and Life*, J. Conant (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 279-294, p. 300.

⁵ John McDowell also argues along these lines. See his ‘Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity’ in *Rorty and his Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 109-122.

Chapter 1 - The World Well Lost or Better Regained?

Only the man who comprehends the relation between representation and represented, in that arduous but rigorously scientific way characteristic of the epistemologist in the last century and the philosopher of language in this, can be transcendental in the required sense. For only he can represent *representing itself* accurately. Only such an accurate transcendental account of the relationship of representation will keep the Knowing Subject in touch with the Object, word with world, scientist with particle, moral philosopher with the Law, philosophy itself with reality itself. So whenever dialecticians start developing their coherentist and historicist views, Kantians explain that it is another sad case of Berkeley's Disease, and that there is no cure save a still better, more luminously convincing, more transparent philosophical account of representation.⁶

Do Appearances Deceive?

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty takes issue with a traditional idea of philosophy as a fundamental discipline that is tasked with understanding the foundations of knowledge.⁷ This idea casts philosophy as a unique non-empirical

⁶ Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida", in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 90-109, pp. 96-97.

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1980). pp. 131-164.

investigation into the mind that aims to understand how we are able accurately to represent reality. Rorty classifies such epistemology as part of a mistaken picture which “holds traditional philosophy captive”. This picture is of the mind as “a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not”. Rorty proposes that the idea of the mind as an inner realm of “vision” in which the world is immediately present to consciousness has encouraged philosophers to think of knowledge as a form of “mirroring” that depends on a relationship of accurate correspondence between the mind and reality. This has lead philosophy to set itself apart from the rest of culture and pursue the line of investigation into how such a relation of correspondence may (or may not) inform and justify our knowledge claims and methods of inquiry. Had this picture of the mind not taken hold of the philosophical imagination then, according to Rorty, “the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself.”⁸ The mind, conceived of as a mirror, is a philosophical invention that is in need of dismantling, Rorty argues, because it distracts us from appreciating the linguistic nature of belief and the social nature of justification. Rorty proposes an alternative view of knowledge that regards the justification of a belief to be an agreement between people rather an agreement between the mind and reality. We should abandon epistemology, according to Rorty, because it is not possible for us to seek an epistemic relationship to reality that escapes this linguistic and social context. The epistemological boundary that Rorty describes does not amount to a denial of the existence of an extra-linguistic reality. Rorty simply denies that our language can be thought to have the kind of “correspondence” to such a reality that epistemologists have traditionally attempted to demonstrate.

⁸ This and the preceding two quotes are from Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 12.

A problem with the attempt to conceive of the mind as a mechanism of representation is that we do not seem to be able to agree on a definitive philosophical account of how this mechanism works. Since Descartes' theory of "clear and distinct ideas" there have been many modern epistemologies that have attempted to provide a foundation for knowledge and inquiry. Each has tended, however, to be marked by the contingencies of the time from which they arose. The upshot of this is that every attempt at a comprehensive epistemological account of the mind's relation to non-linguistic reality has failed to provide us with a convincing and hence lasting model. For Rorty, the historical and cultural contingency of philosophical reflection (and of thought in general) is an indication that the idea of the Mirror of Nature that has motivated philosophical enquiry is merely a fantasy. If we acknowledge this then we are at a point in our philosophical maturity at which we ought to abandon it with the same confidence with which many in the West are abandoning religion in favour of secular life. This analogy with the decline of religion and the growing secularization of the West is one that Rorty returns to again and again in his work because he equates the desire for a theory of representation with a desire for the kind of transcendence that religion aspires to. He describes the attachment to the idea of the Mirror of Nature as an attachment to the idea of being in touch with something greater and more enduring than the contingent language and culture that we inhabit. Rorty argues that once we fully accept the contingency of the way we live and talk we will no longer see any need for the kind of epistemology that tempts us with the offer of transcendence. We will be content to seek agreement with one another by simply exchanging linguistic propositions without concern for their correspondence (or lack of correspondence) to an independent reality.

When considering what it is about the idea of the Mirror of Nature that makes it problematic Rorty turns his critical gaze towards the concept of representation itself. The purpose of a theory of representation is to overcome scepticism by explaining how our representations correspond to reality. It is, however, in the nature of a representation to “stand for” whatever it represents and this puts any representation at a remove from its object. By conceiving of the mind as a system of representation we put it at a remove from reality and raise the question of how we can know that its contents correspond to that reality. The model of the mind as a system of representation forces us to distinguish appearances from reality and encourages scepticism regarding our ability to know reality “as it *really* is”.⁹ Rorty cites Descartes as the inventor of the modern conception of the mind as a system of representation. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty contrasts Descartes’ conception of the mind with Aristotle’s in order to illustrate how Descartes redefined the concept of perception in order to facilitate scepticism:

The substantial forms of frogness and starness get right into the Aristotelian intellect, and are there in just the same way they are in the frogs and the stars – *not* in the way in which frogs and stars are reflected in mirrors. In Descartes’s conception – the one which became the basis for “modern” epistemology – it is *representations* which are in the “mind.” The Inner Eye surveys these representations hoping to find some mark which will testify to their fidelity.¹⁰

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp 45-61. Rorty cites Wallace Matson, “Why Isn’t the Mind-Body Problem Ancient?” in *Mind, Matter and Method: Essays in Philosophy and Science in Honor of*

In Aristotle's model, the mind becomes identical with the object of perception so there is no question of a lack of correspondence between them. As a result, scepticism does not have the same traction in Aristotle's model that it has in Descartes'. That traction is gained by treating the mind itself as fundamentally representational in nature. So long as we conceive of the mind as a system of representation we maintain a lack of identity between the mind and reality that creates the problem of how to assure ourselves of their correspondence. Without such assurance we are committed (according to the argument of the *Meditations*) to scepticism regarding our ability to generate accurate representations of reality. In the *Meditations*, Descartes argues that if we could find some idea that gives us this assurance we could bring scepticism to a halt and establish a secure foundation on which to build our knowledge of reality. Rorty's attempt to change our philosophical frame of reference so that we no longer think of cognition as a form of representation is an attempt to set this problem of certainty aside.

One might argue that in rejecting the concepts of representation and realism Rorty makes too large a concession to the threat of Cartesian scepticism. Given that Rorty regards his work to be continuous with the pragmatist tradition in philosophy it is interesting to compare Rorty's response to Cartesian scepticism with that of Charles Sanders Peirce (one of the founders of pragmatism). Peirce shares Rorty's misgivings about the correspondence model when understood in terms of a relationship between

Herbert Feigl, ed. Paul Feyerabend and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis, 1966). Matson describes how the Greeks associated experience with the body rather than the mind. They did not separate sensation from the material world in the way that Descartes did. Although, Rorty does not explicitly state it in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, his account of Descartes' influence on modern philosophy parallels Dewey's criticism of the "spectator theory of knowledge" in *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958). For a discussion of this parallel see Gideon Calder, *Rorty's Politics of Redescription* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 12-20.

appearances and a remote metaphysical reality (or “thing-in-itself”).¹¹ However, far from taking those misgivings as a reason to reject realism, Peirce denies that we should regard the problem of universal scepticism with the kind of seriousness that makes it corrosive to our sense of realism. Peirce’s definition of a belief as something that must be judged according to its practical consequences leads him to surmise that universal scepticism is not a serious proposition that any person is able to entertain in a sustained way when faced with the concrete concerns of life. Unless we are consistently willing to act (and talk) as if appearances are illusory and reality is a complete mystery to us then we can disregard scepticism. Peirce is hence opposed to the kind of wholesale scepticism that Descartes pursues in the *Meditations* because it takes doubt to an absurd extreme. Peirce’s position is an interesting contrast to Rorty’s because it suggests that the concept of representation is not necessarily wedded to the problem of scepticism if we have no genuine or specific reason to doubt that the content of our minds is able to correspond to reality. Peirce implies that Rorty’s rejection of representationalism and realism is an unnecessary concession to a pseudo-problem. The fact that our language and understanding are subject to change and contingency is no reason to worry that reality might be a complete mystery to us. Peirce argues that although we may come to change much of what we currently think we are not prevented from coming to know reality more and more as we test and modify our understanding through scientific inquiry. Peirce’s position raises the question of whether Rorty’s rejection of representationalism and realism is really necessary. Is there, then, really a problem inherent in the concept of representation

¹¹ “The *Ding an sich* ... can neither be indicated nor found. Consequently, no proposition can refer to it, and nothing true or false can be predicated of it. Therefore, all references to it must be thrown out as meaningless surplusage.” *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. 8 vols. Edited by C. Hartstone and P. Weiss (Vols. 1-6) and A. Burks (Vols. 7-8) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), vol. 5, paragraph 525.

that requires us to discard realism and representationalism?

Rorty's argument against realism and representationalism is often premised on the notion that there precisely is a problem inherent in the very notion of the practice of representation. He often argues that in order for a representation to correspond to its object both object and representation have to satisfy the implausible requirement of being identical to (or "mirroring") each other. For example, in order to discredit the idea that language represents reality in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty argues along the following lines:

The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own. If we cease to attempt to make sense of the idea of such a nonhuman language, we shall not be tempted to [...] claim that the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called "facts." But if one clings to the notion of self-subsistent facts, it is easy to start capitalizing the word "truth" and treating it as something identical either with God or with the world as God's project.¹²

Here Rorty imagines that realism requires us to believe that our true linguistic statements are identical to something "out there" that is akin to a language, as if the relation of correspondence can only be conceived of as a relation of resemblance. Rorty plays on the absurdity of the idea that reality might be identical to language in order to discredit realism and representationalism. This, however, is an effect that is

¹² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.

only achieved by assuming that reality would need to be “sentence-shaped” in order to be accurately represented by sentences. In this case Rorty employs a particularly narrow understanding of what is required for a representation to correspond to its object. He seeks to persuade us that the notion of representation is exhausted by the mirror metaphor. A mirror offers the model of a very particular type of representation that is useful in circumstances in which an identical copy of the object is required. Very often, however, the purpose of a representation is not to “mirror” its object. Language, for example, need not be thought of as an attempt to provide an identical copy of reality. It can rather, for example, be conceived of as a medium that is meant to allow us to reason and communicate about reality. The fact that we reason in “sentence-shaped chunks” that bear no “mirror-like” resemblance to reality does not mean that our reasoning necessarily fails to correspond to reality. As we shall see, a representation need not be identical to its object in order to “correspond” to it. Our linguistic system can successfully represent reality without satisfying the purported need for “mirroring” it.

Rorty, it is well-known, conceives of himself as a follower of William James. James’ suspicion towards metaphors of “mirroring” also provides the starting point for much of his discussion of the nature of truth in his contribution to pragmatism:

The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. Like other popular views, this one follows the analogy of the most usual experience. Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut your eyes and think of yonder clock on the wall, and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial. But your idea of its “works” (unless you are a clock-

maker) is much less of a copy, yet it passes muster, for it in no way clashes with the reality. Even though it should shrink to the mere word “works,” that word still serves you truly [...] ¹³

In this passage, James prefigures Rorty’s questioning of the “mirror” or “copy” conception of representation. They both use this argument as a way of justifying a more instrumentalist interpretation of the purpose of language. James emphasizes the lack of resemblance between our words and their objects in order to erode the requirement of correspondence and emphasize the importance of practical and intellectual utility. James prefers to use concepts to do with “dealing” or “coping” with reality as opposed to “representing” or “corresponding” to it. Both James and Rorty take the idea that our representations of reality are not a “copy” of their object as providing a justification for undermining the standards of representation and correspondence. They thereby deny those standards any significant role in their respective conceptions of truth. Because of this, however, their arguments often employ a particularly narrow definition of what a representation is. There are many examples of the practice of representation that do not rely on the representation in question being identical to its object. In “On a New List of Categories”, for example, C. S. Peirce identifies a number of different types of representation. The type of representation that is captured by Rorty’s metaphor of “mirroring” is defined by what Peirce calls a “likeness”. Peirce describes likenesses as representations “whose relation to their objects is a mere community in some quality”. This relation would include the supposed likeness between our language and reality that Rorty claims would need to exist in order for our language to correspond to reality. In addition,

¹³ William James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 96.

however, Pierce describes a type of representation “whose relation to their objects is an imputed character”. These are representations that have been ascribed to objects as a matter of convention in the way that symbols are ascribed to things (the nature of those semiotic signs is “arbitrary” to use Saussure’s term). This additional type of representation allows for a form of “correspondence” between representations and their objects that does not imply any likeness between them. Words and symbols (and the systems in which they feature) can correspond to objects, properties and their relations without being identical copies of them.

Rorty is obviously aware of the semantic notion of reference and that realist theories of reference rely on a correspondence between words and the reality they are thought to represent. The problem, he argues, with suggesting that this relation of correspondence need not presuppose a relation of likeness is that it would require - in Rorty’s words - an “independent test for the accuracy of representation – of reference or correspondence to an ‘antecedently determinate reality’.”¹⁴ As far as Rorty is concerned, this is something that the model of representation rules out because that model necessarily separates us from that “antecedently determinate reality”. The model of representation sets reality apart and makes it mysterious. There is no independent standard of correspondence because we have to rely on the terms set by the representation. It does no good to talk of our words corresponding to real objects and properties because without those words to define them we have no conception of what those words correspond to. This seems to be why Rorty assumes that representationalist realist accounts of language have to conceive of reality as being “sentence-shaped”. If they did not, the argument appears to run, then such accounts would have to invoke a conception of reality’s intrinsic nature that they cannot lay

¹⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, p. 6.

claim to.¹⁵ Reality can only “appear” to us. We cannot know reality as it “really is” unless it is identical to our representations (which seems unlikely). For this reason Rorty believes that realism is not a serious proposition. At the same time, as far as he is concerned, his rejection of realism and representationalism is not an unnecessary concession to the threat of scepticism because scepticism is really a serious problem only for representationalists. According to the terms that Rorty sets out, realism requires us to know reality’s intrinsic nature in a way that we cannot if we have to use representations to do it.

So is the fact that we have to use representations intrinsically a problem? If we are not able to transcend the practice of representation in order to compare our representations to reality “as it is *in-itself*” must we abandon the concepts of realism and representation? The fact that it is possible for a representation to correspond to its object without being identical to it suggests that this lack of identity (call it the appearance-reality distinction) is not intrinsically a problem. We can accept that our representations do not provide an identical “mirror-like” reflection of reality and still suppose that they can correspond to reality. It is true that appearances can deceive but they do not necessarily deceive by virtue of being appearances. We may not be able to identify our representations with reality but they are none the worse for that. We

¹⁵ Even if a representationalist tried to argue that we have an extra-linguistic awareness of reality that our language is intended to communicate, this would give rise to the same problem because that extra-linguistic awareness would still be a representation. The idea of such an extra-linguistic dimension to cognition is something that Rorty rules out. He does so in the context of his discussion of empiricism in which he criticises the attempt to use experience as such a form of extra-linguistic awareness. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty follows Wilfred Sellars’ argument in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” very closely in order to reject what Sellars calls the Myth of the Given. This is the idea that we have a form of awareness called “experience” that is given to us unmediated by the linguistic rules that we use to form propositions. This myth is used by empiricists to maintain that we have a dimension to our cognition that our language is intended to express. Often this extra-linguistic dimension is associated with vision so that we are thought to be aware of reality in an immediate way. This is partly where Rorty’s metaphor of the mind as a “mirror” comes from. The problem, according to Sellars, is that “all awareness [...] is a linguistic affair”. See Wilfred Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality*, p. 160. Also Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 182.

benefit from recognising them as representations because this encourages us to test their accuracy. Rorty would ask how we are supposed to tell when this standard of accuracy has been met. According to him, all we have is “the success which is supposedly explained by this accuracy”:

Representationalists offer us no way of deciding whether a certain linguistic item is usefully deployed because it stands in these relations [of reference or correspondence to an antecedently determinate reality], or whether its utility is due to some factors which have nothing to do with them – as the utility of a fulcrum or a thumb has nothing to do with its “representing” or “corresponding” to the weights lifted, or the objects manipulated, with its aid. So antirepresentationalists think “we use ‘atom’ as we do, and atomic physics works, because atoms are as they are” is no more enlightening than “opium puts people to sleep because of its dormative power.”¹⁶

Rorty argues that the claim of representational accuracy adds nothing to an explanation of the success of a description. It is an “empty compliment” that representationalists try to apply once a description has shown itself to be practically useful.¹⁷ Where scientific theories are concerned, Rorty argues, it is their predictive power that determines their success not whether they represent what is “really” there. The question of whether atoms are as we say they are is beside the point compared to whether atomic theory gives us the power of prediction and control. We can drop the

¹⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, p. 6.

question of whether our descriptions “correspond to reality” because we cannot assess this independently and so it is not relevant to us (at least it should not be according to Rorty).

A representationalist might ask if we can really be satisfied by the instrumentalist explanation of success that Rorty offers. Is utility all we really need in order to intelligibly explain the success of a description? In the case of science one might argue that a theory’s predictive power is often most intelligibly explained and improved by its relative representational accuracy. In that case, the question of whether atoms are as we say they are is not immaterial. Accuracy (in this sense) may not be necessary in order to make successful predictions but it makes successful predictions more likely.¹⁸ We may not be able to transcend our theories in order to judge whether they correspond to reality *absolutely* but does that require us to abandon the standard of representational accuracy? The claim that Newtonian astronomy is a more accurate model of the universe compared to Hellenistic astrology is not “an empty compliment” even though Newtonian astronomy is not *absolutely* accurate. The concept of relative accuracy (as a means of explaining relative success) is crucial in this context because Rorty tends to define realism in a way that does not accommodate it. As far as he is concerned the purpose of realism (and of theories of representation in general) is to provide absolutes. This assumption lies at the heart of Rorty’s polemic against epistemology in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

The very idea of “philosophy” as something distinct from “science” would make little sense without the Cartesian claim that by turning inward we

¹⁸ See Wesley Salmon, “Statistical Explanation” in *Statistical Explanation and Statistical Relevance*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 1971). See also, James Robert Brown’s *Smoke and Mirrors: How Science Reflects Reality* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 20.

could find ineluctable truth, and the Kantian claim that this truth imposes limits on the possible results of empirical inquiry. The notion that there could be such a thing as “foundations of knowledge” (*all* knowledge – in every field, past, present, and future) or a “theory of representation” (*all* representation, in familiar vocabularies and those not yet dreamed of) depends on the assumption that there is some such a priori constraint.¹⁹

The whole purpose of epistemology, according to Rorty, is to find some form of representation that exemplifies the truth and sets the foundation for further inquiry. In so doing, philosophy attempts to provide absolutes that are immune from the contingencies of further inquiry. Epistemology seeks a foundation for inquiry that assures us that our minds correspond to reality in an absolute way. Rorty’s rejection of epistemology is motivated by a conviction that there are no such absolutes or foundations. Rorty believes that it is a mistake to assume that there are certain representations (or forms of representation) that exemplify what it is like to correspond to reality. Figures like Thomas Kuhn have taught us that we have no idea in advance of an innovation where inquiry will take us and that many ideas that have formerly been regarded as fundamental to our understanding of reality have been changed or abandoned in the course of scientific inquiry.²⁰ In the face of ongoing intellectual revolution philosophy is not in a position to offer absolutes and the growing acceptance of this amongst certain figures working within the tradition of analytic philosophy (such as Quine and Putnam) forms the backdrop of Rorty’s

¹⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 9.

²⁰ This is the problem of “theory-change” that Rorty discusses in chapter six of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 257-311. The fact that we continually change our conception of reality makes it difficult to define what our concepts refer to in absolute terms. As a result, Rorty argues that the realist concept of “reference” and the notion of correspondence that it relies on ought to be abandoned.

reconsideration of the value of epistemology in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

So is the fact that we might not be able to transcend our ongoing inquiries and appeal to anything more than the “success which is supposedly explained by [our] accuracy” intrinsically a problem? If we are not able to judge whether our representations correspond to reality absolutely must we abandon the standard of accuracy? The fact that we can use relative accuracy as an explanation of success suggests that an inability to provide absolutes need not intrinsically be a problem. We could accept that our representations may not correspond to reality *absolutely* and still suppose that they are likely to correspond relatively accurately the more successful they are. It seems difficult to imagine a better way of explaining our relative success at negotiating reality.²¹ If reality was a complete mystery to us it seems unlikely that we would have much success at all. Even Rorty’s instrumentalist metaphors of tool-use are not exempt from implying a standard of adequacy or “fit”. The usefulness of some tools would be particularly hard to explain without the concept of representational accuracy. How else would we explain the success of a map for example? The important question is: why does Rorty believe that philosophy is so unsuited to the task of comprehending “the relation between representation and represented” in a way that accommodates change and contingency? What is it that commits philosophical realism and representationalism to the kind of absolutism that makes contingency and change such serious problems? It is ironic that Rorty defines realism and representationalism in such a rigid way given his belief in our ability to re-invent our concepts when they no longer prove useful. Ultimately we will see that

²¹ James Robert Brown has proposed that, although realism does not provide necessary or sufficient conditions for success, it is the best way of rendering that success intelligible. Brown argues that realism is part of a narrative that we use to make sense of our success rather than something that we can prove conclusively. See his *Smoke and Mirrors: How Science Reflects Reality* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3-25.

Rorty's dogmatism on this matter has its roots in his career long adherence to A. N. Whitehead's teaching that all philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. I will argue this in more detail in the last part of this chapter in which I will begin to show that it is not just the notion of relative accuracy that can help us avoid the absolutism that Rorty associates with realism. I would like to show how the notion of "conceptual relativity" (or what I like to call "representational relativity") can be integrated into realism. Before I get to that I would like to consider the extent to which Rorty's anti-representationalist pragmatism can be accused of repeating and reinforcing the terms that it seeks to dissolve. I will do this by considering the extent to which Rorty's argument travels a similar path to Kant's idealism in its handling of our inability to judge whether our representations correspond to reality absolutely.

The Epistemic Fallacy

An important claim that can be gleaned from my initial statement of Rorty's position is that the approach that he advocates as an alternative to traditional epistemology provides a radical departure from "the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation". In order to capture the alternative relationship that he favours Rorty often refers to language as a tool rather than a representation. An incidental way of conceiving of this relationship is suggested by a passage in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

How was it possible for thought to deal with the very object *itself*? We

feel as if by means of it we had caught reality in our net?²²

Wittgenstein's metaphor of the net is an intriguing alternative to Rorty's mirror or to Wittgenstein's own early treatment of language as a way of picturing the world presented in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's metaphor suggests a relationship between language and reality that does not depend on a likeness between the two as if language is cast over the world in order to "manage" it rather than "reflect" it. Having made this imaginative leap away from what he calls "representationalism" many critics have accused Rorty of advocating a kind of idealism.²³ The philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar, for example, has accused Rorty of committing an "epistemic fallacy" in which he reduces the real (the subject-independent) to the epistemological (the subject-dependent).²⁴ Bhaskar argues that even though our current scientific understanding and the ontology that it commits us to are historical and social products, nevertheless, the intelligibility of the theoretic, experimental and applied scientific enterprise commits us to realism. This is because that enterprise presupposes the subject-independent existence of the tendencies and mechanisms that it attempts to describe. Bhaskar argues that Rorty commits a fallacy akin to Hume's reduction of causal laws to constant conjunctions within experience by mistakenly reducing the object of scientific inquiry to the subject-dependent dimension. I would

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), § 428. John McDowell quotes this section of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 27, n.3. In response to Wittgenstein, McDowell denies that there is a problem: "there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. [...] Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought." *Mind and World* p. 27.

²³ See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 162-3. Rorty responds to Williams in *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, pp. 4-5.

²⁴ Roy Bhaskar, "Rorty, Realism and the Idea of Freedom", in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1990) 198-232, p. 199.

like to explore this criticism while showing that Rorty's argument has a number of things in common with Kant's idealism (rather than Berkeleian or post-Kantian German idealism).²⁵ Doing so will show the extent to which Rorty repeats and reinforces the problems that he seeks to dissolve.

Rorty does not ontologically reduce the real to the epistemological.²⁶ Rorty's position is designed to caution us against assuring ourselves that we can *represent* reality within the epistemological sphere. In a paper of 1980 entitled "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" Rorty openly describes similarities between his view and those of idealists. Rorty uses the rhetoric of idealism in the course of denying that language corresponds to an independent reality:

"Thus one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing rather than a description with the thing-in-itself".²⁷

Rorty rhetorically deploys the appearance-reality distinction despite the fact that it comes from the very representationalist tradition that his anti-representationalist approach is intended to subvert. Rorty's purpose in treating language as a tool rather than as a representation is precisely to rid us of this kind of rhetoric and to discourage us from taking the question of our representational capability seriously. Nevertheless,

²⁵ For a reading of Rorty that regards his argument to be close to a Berkeleian form of idealism see Gideon Calder, *Rorty's Politics of Redescription* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 40-48.

²⁶ I think that James Tartaglia is close to the mark when he denies that Rorty regards reality as being "language-constituted". Tartaglia may be close to the mark but he still labels Rorty in a misleading way by calling his position "metaphysical pluralism". See Tartaglia, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Rorty and the Mirror of Nature* (Routledge, 2007), p. 226. It seems to me that Rorty is exactly what he says he is. He is an *anti-representationalist*. The reason that Tartaglia is right in supposing that Rorty would not accept the prefix "metaphysical" is because Rorty tries to reject the notion of representing anything at all, metaphysical or not. Rorty's intention is to perform a therapeutic intervention in order to end our representationalist philosophical discourse rather than to perpetuate that discourse. The coherence and success of Rorty's enterprise is another matter.

²⁷ Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism", in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 139-159, p. 154.

as the above quote shows, Rorty often uses the rhetoric of representation. Rorty's use of the concept of description raises the question of how indispensable the notion of representation is to his (and our) understanding of the various purposes of linguistic communication. In the course of this chapter we will see how Rorty continues to rely on the concept of representation in the course of articulating his anti-representationalist position. The reason why a comparison between Rorty's view and those of idealists is useful is because it emphasises how his anti-representationalism actually draws on the representationalist scepticism that it is intended to dissolve.

To begin my comparison between Rorty's and Kant's approaches I will begin by considering the reasoning behind Kant's appeal to the *a priori* as a corrective to the model of intuition based empirical knowledge. This will allow us to appreciate Kant's influence on those – like Rorty – who criticize the naivety of attempts to reduce the subject's knowledge to a body of mimetic “mirror-like” empirical representations. Kant's insistence on the importance of *a priori* rules that cannot be established by empirical intuition is echoed by Rorty's appeal to language as the organizing principle of human thought. As indicated in the above quote, Rorty's rejection of our claims to “mirror-like” representational objectivity can also be shown to bear strong similarities to Kant's Copernican Revolution in epistemology because it is motivated by the problem that we cannot compare our concepts to reality “as it is in-itself”. Understanding Rorty's association of the doctrine of realism with the need for such a neutral “God's-Eye” view of reality (to use Hilary Putnam's phrase) is crucial to understanding his rejection of realism. According to Rorty, without such a God's-Eye view of reality realism is not a viable option. If we are not able to claim that our representations correspond to reality absolutely then we must abandon realism.

Understanding this dogmatic aspect of Rorty's rejection of realism is also crucial because it is a major weakness of his argument. After all, a representation need not correspond to reality in this absolute sense in order to be realistic. Having established a picture of the similarities between Kant's and Rorty's responses to our lack of a God's-Eye view of reality I will then look more closely at the philosophical presuppositions that lead Rorty to believe that his rejection of realism is necessary. As we shall see, they arise from his identification of realism and representationalism with terms that Plato set out.

Roy Bhaskar writes that the tendency to commit the epistemic fallacy springs from a perceived need for what he calls a "justificationist epistemology". Epistemologies of this kind are characterized by the tendency to appeal to the subject-dependent "epistemological" dimension as a source of justification for our knowledge.²⁸ Such a move effaces the nature of reality as a source of justification and substitutes a more readily available source. In Rorty's case, justification is defined as an agreement between people rather than an agreement between our beliefs and reality. He argues that knowledge should be treated as a collection of propositions related through rational argument rather than a collection of representations related to reality through a mechanism of correspondence:

A claim to knowledge is a claim to have justified belief, and it is rarely the case that we appeal to the proper functioning of our organism as a *justification*. Granted that we sometimes justify a belief by saying, for example, "I have good eyes," why should we think that [such appeals]

²⁸ Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, third edition (Verso: London and New York, 2008), p. 40.

could tell us about the logical relations between propositions?²⁹

Rorty insists that we commit an error when we try to identify justification with a mechanism of correspondence. For him, justification is a matter of citing propositions in support of other propositions. It is a mistake to imagine that those propositions can be justified by their supposed correspondence to reality. As we have seen, Rorty doubts that the notion of correspondence makes sense given that our linguistic system does not “mirror” reality.

For realists like Roy Bhaskar, the restriction of justification to the subject-dependent sphere is a mistake. Such epistemological sources as reason and experience cannot replace the nature of reality as the justification for our beliefs. From a realist perspective it is possible to see the debate between rationalists and empiricists as a spurious dispute over what should replace reality as the justification for our beliefs. Broadly put, the rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries held that the uncertainty involved in seeking empirical confirmation for our knowledge claims could be circumvented by justifying claims according to rational principles and that the intuitive, analytic and deductive powers of reason were sufficient to establish knowledge. According to empiricists like Locke and Hume, however, the rationalist method is inadequate. Rationality may allow us to reason according to principles that exist separately from experience but, according to the empiricists, only experience can provide justification for our beliefs. From the perspective of realists like Roy Bhaskar it is from out of this misguided dispute over whether reason or experience can provide sufficient justification for our knowledge claims that Immanuel Kant’s equally misguided synthesis of the two emerged.

²⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 141.

In the introduction to his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant states - in the manner of an empiricist - that all knowledge claims must refer to experience. He also makes it plain that he shares the rationalist aim of establishing strict necessity and universality for those claims.³⁰ Kant states that we must look to a source other than our immediate experience for appropriate grounds for certainty because any attempt to derive universal and necessary principles from contingent empirical experiences is insufficient to establish the strictness of those principles. From our experience we can only say that “as far as we have observed until now, no exception is to be found to this or that rule” (CPR B 3). Our contingent experience can never confirm the necessity and universality of any knowledge claim and so in order to maintain the pursuit of an appropriate source of empirical justification for those claims Kant is faced with the challenge of positing necessary and universal principles that are not derived from sensory intuitions but which still refer to the empirical world. To satisfy this requirement Kant enlarges his concept of experience beyond a manifold of contingent empirical intuitions to include actively constituting and necessary sense-making principles that are supplied *a priori*. Kant claims that there are certain necessary *a priori* principles that our experience cannot do without because they make experience possible in the first place. For example, in ‘The Transcendental Aesthetic’ Kant argues that the apprehension of time requires the atomisation and synthesis of a temporally undetermined sensory manifold into a chain of successive appearances (CPR A 20/B 34). Given that the matter of sensation provides no determinate temporal order for appearances there must be an *a priori* rule that orders them. Kant claims that the principle of cause and effect provides such a rule. The order of

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett: 1996), A 1/ B1. All further references are given in the text at CPR with marginal A and B numbers.

appearances is determined so that what occurs happens as an effect of a preceding occurrence (CPR 198-199/B 243-244). Kant's solution to the problem of appealing to the empirical as a basis for certainty is to install the *a priori* in experience. The *a priori* actively constitutes experience so that it contains a necessary order. The subject-dependent dimension can then play its role as a substitute for the real subject-independent object of our knowledge claims.

Locke's and Hume's empiricist epistemologies comprise explanations that begin with the subject's sensory input. Reality impresses itself on the subject and the way that those impressions represent reality to the subject sets the conditions for the subject's knowledge. Kant's brand of empiricism, on the other hand, introduces standards of *a priori* conceptual determination that are supplied by the subject. Contrary to Locke's account, our subjectivity is not a *tabula rasa* upon which reality imprints itself; nor is the empirical realm merely a Humean succession of atomistic and contingently related sense-impressions. The inadequacy of Hume's account of the empirical as a source of certainty leads Kant to infer that the subject's understanding is not given to it solely by its intuited sensory input. Kant's idealism is predicated on the assumption that sensory intuition is not enough and that we must employ necessary and universal rules that are supplied *a priori*. From Richard Rorty's perspective, the idea that a transcendental deduction is capable of setting out necessary and universal conditions of possible knowledge is an example of that wider picture which "holds traditional philosophy captive" because it models the understanding on an innate and unchanging psychological mechanism. It supposes that there is a realm of fixed "concepts" that constitute the mind and form necessary truths that can be studied as the foundations of knowledge. Rorty regards Quine's

attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction as fatal to this attempt to regard knowledge as having any such conceptual foundations. Nevertheless, a precursor of Rorty's rejection of our claims to representational objectivity can be seen in Kant's idealism because Kant's appeal to *a priori* rules involves a challenge to the assumption that the content of our minds corresponds to reality "as it is in itself".

Kant's challenge to the identification of the source of our knowledge with an impression or intuition based empiricism is upheld by Rorty in his own criticism of Locke. The same concept of representation that Rorty's metaphor of the mirror captures is applied in Locke's metaphor of the mind as a blank canvas upon which the world makes impressions of itself. These metaphors associate the notion of sensory experience with a mimetic kind of intuition and so make the domain of our sensory experience an apt candidate for a source of "mirror-like" representation. On this view the senses are thought to convey knowledge of reality to the extent that they produce representations that are accurate likenesses of reality. Locke states that the mind is partly made up of a set of "ideas" that objectively represent reality by virtue of its ability to intuit a number of qualities that are identical to the way that world really is. Some features of our empirical intuitions mirror the world:

Qualities thus considered in bodies are:

First, such as are utterly inseparable from the body, in what state soever it be; [...] These I call *original* or *primary qualities* of body; which I think we may observe to produce simple *ideas* in us, viz. solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number. [...] the ideas of *primary qualities* of bodies are *resemblances* of them, and their patterns do really exist in the

bodies themselves; [...] they may be called *real qualities*, because they really exist in those bodies.³¹

Kant's response to such intuition based empirical explanations of cognition is put succinctly in the first *Critique*: "The understanding cannot intuit anything, and the senses cannot think anything. Only from their union can cognition arise" (CPR A51-52/B 75-76). According to Kant's description the "merely empirical" is inadequate as a source of cognition because it lacks the organising structure that the *a priori* provides. The subject's understanding cannot be adequately explained with reference to the kind of intuited mimetic mirror-like representations that Locke describes.

Rorty's own argument against Locke in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* takes its lead from Wilfred Sellars' approach to the philosophy of language.³² In his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Sellars attacks the kind of foundational empiricism that Locke proposes in the *Essay* for effacing the linguistic context that gives our words sense. Locke attempted to do this by reducing the import of such words to empirical intuitions ("ideas" in Lockean terms). Sellars argues that thinkers such as Locke overlook the role that our linguistic rules play when it comes to determining our thought and that our experience would mean little to us without the context that our language provides. According to Rorty this insight should encourage us to entirely dissociate our language from any realist representational meaning. Rorty argues that Locke's theory of ideas effaces the linguistic rules that shape our thought and mistakenly models cognition on a mirror. Just as Kant argues that the subject's bare sensory input is inchoate and undetermined until an intellectual

³¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, chap VIII, paragraph 9.

³² See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp, 182-192.

operation orders it in time and space so Rorty argues that we should regard the subject's experience as similarly inchoate without the rules that our language provides. For Rorty, the subject's sensory interaction with the world is no more than a "blind impress" much like a pre-conceptual intuition from Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic".³³ It is merely a brute and inchoate interface with an ineffable reality. Rorty's use of Sellars' psychological nominalism as a replacement for realism makes his position seem like an analogue of Kant's idealism. Language takes on the role of the *a priori* as the organising force in our cognition and the question of whether our thought corresponds to the intrinsic nature of reality is put aside.

We have seen how, from Rorty's perspective, Kant's epistemology is part of that wider picture that "holds traditional philosophy captive" because it attempts to model the subject's understanding on an innate and unchanging conceptual mechanism (rather than on language).³⁴ However, the nature of Kant's account of cognition makes it difficult to apply the mirror metaphor to his epistemology. Crucially, Kant draws a distinction between the way the world appears to the subject and the way things are *in-themselves* and he eschews the need to assure the subject that the *a priori* rules that structure its cognition correspond to such an independent reality. For Kant, the mind should not be modelled on a mirror because the transcendental subject's *a priori* norms do not possess the kind of mirror-like objectivity that Locke's notion of ideas is deemed to possess. They replace such mimetic objectivity with an objectivity that is determined by a rule-like *a priori* necessity and universality. Kant insists that it is enough for our *a priori* epistemic

³³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 23. It is taken from Philip Larkin.

³⁴ Rorty identifies this as "Kant's confusion of predication with synthesis" in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. According to Rorty, Kant mistook the formation of certain sentences for an innate and unchanging psychological mechanism. See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 148-155.

norms to be inescapable rules. They do not have to be regarded as an accurate representation of a mind-independent reality. Having rejected rationalist metaphysics Kant eschews the question of whether our thought corresponds to reality “as it is in itself”. Such a reality remains a metaphysical notion that is beyond our epistemic remit. On Kant's account, the world as it is independently of us is a closed book. Our understanding is determined separately from any ability of the mind to accurately reflect reality's intrinsic nature.

Realist empiricisms uphold the authority of an independent reality and give the subject's cognitions their justification by allocating them a source in experience. For Locke, the mind/mirror is held up to reality in order to generate accurate empirical intuitions and the capacity of the real qualities or properties of the world to be intuited in our empirical “ideas” provides us with accurate knowledge of reality. Locke argues that rationalists pay too high a price for the strategy that they employ in their appeal to innate ideas because they grant those ideas an authority that should be granted alone to empirical intuition. He insists that the subject has knowledge that can be explained and justified by describing its source in experience. Rorty's response to such representationalism is to follow Kant by denying its explanatory force:

The anti-representationalist is quite willing to grant that our language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in. Indeed, he or she insists on this point – the point that our minds or our language could not (as the representationalist skeptic fears) be “out of touch with reality” any more than our bodies could. What he or she denies is that it is explanatorily useful to pick and choose among the contents of our minds

or our language and say that this or that item “corresponds to” or “represents” the environment in a way that some other item does not.³⁵

Rorty repeats Kant’s denial that the practice of explaining “the contents of our minds or our language” can be carried out by describing its correspondence to an independent reality. Rorty does not reduce reality to the contents of our minds or our language. He merely positions himself against those who presume that a correspondence between our language and an independent reality exists and against epistemologists whose explanations try to provide such assurance.

Kant and Rorty make a similar epistemological demarcation between “our minds or our language” and a reality that is independent of them. We commit an error when we try to assure ourselves of our ability to accurately represent such a reality. Rorty’s motivation for offering a pragmatist “justificationist epistemology” is not to ontologically reduce the real to the epistemological. Rorty’s metaphorical description of language as a tool depends on the real existence of whatever the tool is used on. Rorty simply refuses to entertain the possibility that any representational dimension pertains to those tools. Rorty is deaf to the epistemic fallacy that Roy Bhaskar accuses him of because his anti-representationalism holds that our language is not a means of representing reality and so the way reality is need have no bearing on our linguistic behaviour. Rorty’s argument is designed to challenge what he sees as the kind of justificationist explanations that realists propose. According to Rorty, realists commit a fallacy by trying to identify some part of our linguistic practice with an absolutely accurate representation of reality. It is as part of a struggle against such absolutism that Rorty takes an anti-representationalist stance by denying that *any* of our linguistic

³⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 5.

practices represent reality.

Bhaskar puts Rorty's refusal to entertain realism down to his lack of a "philosophical ontology" and defines such ontology as necessary to the scientific enterprise. Such ontology does no more than describe reality as consisting of real subject-independent tendencies and mechanisms that are distinct from our current conception of those tendencies and mechanisms.³⁶ According to Bhaskar, the intelligibility of the scientific enterprise would be lost if it was not understood as an attempt to accurately represent such a subject-independent reality. For Rorty there is no possibility of our representing a subject-independent reality. As we saw above, his paper of 1980 entitled "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" draws explicit parallels between his position and those of idealists. In that paper Rorty describes similarities between Idealism and Textualism while distancing himself from any literal interpretation of the claim that "there is nothing outside the text":

The *only* force of saying that texts do not refer to nontexts is just the old pragmatist chestnut that any specification of a referent is going to be in some vocabulary. Thus one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing rather than a description with the thing-in-itself. This chestnut, in turn, is just an expanded form of Kant's slogan that "Intuitions without concepts are blind," which, in turn, was just a sophisticated restatement of Berkeley's ingenuous remark that "nothing can be like an idea except an idea." [...] Textualism has nothing to add to this claim except a new

³⁶ Roy Bhaskar, "Rorty, Realism and the Idea of Freedom", in *Reading Rorty* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1990), 198-232.

misleading image – the image of the world as consisting of everything written in all the vocabularies used so far.³⁷

Rorty does not deny the existence of a subject-independent reality but he does claim that our inability to transcend our representations and judge whether they correspond to reality “as it is in itself” should lead us to avoid using the model of representation when it comes to describing the relationship that our language has to reality. Rather than dissolve the problem of scepticism Rorty repeats and reinforces it as a reason to reject realism and representationalism.³⁸

Rorty’s wholesale rejection of the model of representation is certainly an extraordinary response to the idea that we cannot assure ourselves that our representations mirror reality “as it is in-itself”. As I have stated, this inability is not intrinsically a problem because we can accept that a representation need not be absolutely identical to reality in order correspond to reality. With this in mind I would like to further explore the reasons why Rorty believes that the lack of an absolute God’s-Eye view of reality is a problem and that his anti-representationalist response is necessary. As we shall see, those reasons are based on a very narrow philosophical understanding of what realism requires.

Footnotes to Plato

Consistently throughout his writing Rorty adheres to A. N. Whitehead’s famous claim

³⁷ Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p.154.

³⁸ Charles Taylor makes a similar criticism of Rorty in “Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition” in *Reading Rorty* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1990), 256-275, pp. 270-271.

that we cannot properly call a form of inquiry “philosophical” that fails to draw on some of the terms and oppositions that Plato made canonical.³⁹ All philosophy is, according to Whitehead’s well known dictum, a series of footnotes to Plato. Accordingly, Rorty often states that philosophy has its own specific set of terms which it inherited from the ancient Greeks (most notably Plato) and which commits it to a set of dogmatic and interrelated binary oppositions.⁴⁰ They include the oppositions between the real and the apparent, the absolute and the relative, the essential and the contingent, the found and the made and the object and the subject. According to Rorty, these oppositions maintain the set of special and supposedly perennial metaphysical and epistemological problems that form the philosopher’s area of concern and expertise. Crucially, they define realism as the demand for an absolute conception of reality that makes appearances subject to scepticism. It is precisely this problem that Rorty attempts to overcome by developing his form of pragmatism. His anti-representationalism is crucial to that project because treating language as a tool rather than as a representation is meant to rid us of the need to compare our contingent language to a something more absolute. Rorty’s attitude to philosophy and his anti-representationalist stance can thus be traced back to this rigidly dogmatic and unfavourable account of what realism demands.

Rorty’s presuppositions about what realism and representationalism demand are in evidence in his “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism”. Opposing the supposed objectivity of scientific methodology Rorty writes:

³⁹ Rorty notes this adherence to Whitehead’s claim in the introduction to his *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. xviii.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Rorty’s introduction to *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. xviii, and the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xvi.

[...] the idea of *method* presupposes that of a *privileged vocabulary*, the vocabulary which gets to the essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself as opposed to those which we read into it.⁴¹

Rorty contrasts the different vocabularies that are used by different fields of inquiry and asserts that in order to be realist about any particular one it is necessary to deny the realism of the others. The preferred vocabulary must be considered to represent the properties that things have essentially, intrinsically and *in themselves* as opposed to the properties that are assigned by other vocabularies (those that we merely “read into” things). This is not a contrast between essential and non-essential properties where non-essential properties may exist alongside essential properties. Rorty correlates the contrast between essential and non-essential properties with an opposition between reality and appearances. According to him, the representationalist realist is committed to such a correlation by their need to *privilege* their particular vocabulary. They must regard their vocabulary as the one that captures *the* way things are at the expense of the realism of other vocabularies. Rorty identifies what he considers to be a Platonic yearning for a metaphysical absolute in attempts to assert the representational truth of any of our linguistic practices, and he associates representational realism with a kind of essentialist metaphysical reductionism.

Rorty regards his philosophical outlook as the culmination of a holist and pragmatist trend in contemporary analytic philosophy that has come to undermine the kind of “metaphysical, reductionist needs” that he believes realists and

⁴¹ Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 152.

representationalists cleave to:⁴²

The usual conception, since Plato, has been that at most one among the various vocabularies we use mirrors reality, and that the others are at best “heuristic” or “suggestive”.⁴³

Just as Plato considered the object of knowledge to be a realm of essential metaphysical truth that stands apart from the vagaries of appearance so Rorty construes the intended object of realist representation to be an essential reality that stands apart from the vagaries of representation. This goal is unfeasible given the diverse nature of our forms of description and so Rorty concludes that the only viable solution is to deny the representational nature of those forms of description. In his paper “Non-Reductive Physicalism”, for example, Rorty claims that his anti-representationalist pragmatism is the best way to approach the apparent ontological inconsistency involved in using both physical and folk-psychological language because by treating the two forms of description as tools (rather than as representations) we can avoid the realist need to assert the exclusive truth of only one of them.⁴⁴ By denying the representational nature of these forms of description we can avoid the need for reduction. We can eschew what Rorty regards as the representational realist’s “attempt to find a single language sufficient to state all the truths there are to state”.⁴⁵ Rorty believes that his anti-representationalist pragmatism is the only way to avoid having to gratify what he perceives to be the realist’s need for

⁴² Rorty “Non-Reductive Physicalism”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 113-125, pp. 116-117.

⁴³ Rorty, “Non-Reductive Physicalism”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 113-125, p. 124.

⁴⁴ See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 205-209.

⁴⁵ Rorty, “Non-Reductive Physicalism”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 113-125, p. 124.

reduction.

Rorty never considers the possibility that the need for a “single language to state all the truths there are to state” could be denied by realists. He seems to assume that any deviation from that requirement would lead to an ontology that would be intolerable to the realist. Rorty thereby assumes that in order to be considered a realistic representation of its referent a form of description must maintain that its referent is *nothing but* whatever that form of description says that it is. The realist must identify reality with a particular representation of it to the exclusion of other possible representations. On this view, having different ways to describe the same referent would entail an inconsistent ontology because it would represent that referent as being *nothing but* one thing at the same time as being *nothing but* another.⁴⁶ However, it is not necessary for a realist to hold such a reductionist view. It is possible to maintain that we can realistically represent the same referent in different ways depending on the form of representation that we use. According to this “representational relativism” it is unnecessary to read a problematic ontology into our use of different forms of representation. To use Rorty’s metaphor against him, realists could conceive of reality as having numerous sets of apparent “joints” for our language to “cut at” and could deny that our inability to reduce them to a single set is any reason to deny the realism of those representations. Unfortunately, Rorty assumes that the realist must believe that we can only have one exclusive form of realist representation and that the rest of our representations must be treated as false or “mere appearance”.

In a number of places Rorty states that the appropriateness of different forms

⁴⁶ Michael Poole has called this kind of reasoning “nothing-buttery”. See his *Users Guide to Science and Belief*, third edition (Oxford: Lion Hudson Plc, 2007), p. 36.

of description depends on the context in which an object is described. For example, in the introduction to his *Essays on Heidegger and Others* he asserts “the irreducibility of house descriptions to timber descriptions, or of animal descriptions to cell descriptions” and in his “Non-Reductive Physicalism” he deploys a distinction between micro-structural and macro-structural descriptions of the brain.⁴⁷ Yet, he also holds philosophical presuppositions that rule out the possibility that this thesis of representational relativity could be held by realists. This approach is spelled out, for example, in his paper “A World Without Substances or Essences”. In it he continues to sanction the concept of description and argues that language describes the world in a number of contingent ways. But he also presents a stark choice between the “Platonic quest” to “get behind appearances to the intrinsic nature of things” and his own quest to persuade us that “language is not a medium of representation”.⁴⁸ He seems to want to articulate a non-reductive form of representationalism but is constrained by a wish not to be led by the different ways that language is capable of describing things into the Platonic assertion that they are artificial and fail to represent the world as it *really is*. Rorty’s unpreparedness to contemplate a form of representationalism due to this reductionist dogma leads him into the contradictory position of simultaneously asserting the descriptive nature of language while denying its representational nature.

In “A World Without Substances or Essences” Plato’s frustration at the supposed impossibility of attaining knowledge of the essential or intrinsic nature of things by means of their appearance is only matched by Rorty’s enthusiasm for an

⁴⁷ See Rorty, “Introduction: Pragmatism and Post-Nietzschean Philosophy”, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Philosophical Papers Volume 2 (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 4. See also his “Non-Reductive Physicalism”, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 113-125.

⁴⁸ Rorty, “A World Without Substances or Essences” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 49-50.

equivalent impossibility that he believes applies to our forms of description. According to Rorty, our ability to describe things in different ways means that those things cannot be thought to have any essential or intrinsic properties and provides sufficient reason to believe that language is not a means of representation in any case but merely a collection of behavioural rules that serve as useful tools for various purposes. Rorty's anti-representationalist pragmatism has the effect of flattening the world out into a single plane of optional descriptions (or "tools") by failing to acknowledge that in many cases our descriptions vary because the world can be realistically represented along different planes. The stark choice that Rorty offers between his anti-representationalism and the "Platonic quest" to pare our descriptions of things down to single, essential ones is a spurious choice. On the contrary, we can represent things in numerous ways and still hold those representations to be realistic. For example, we can represent a body of mercury as a collection of atoms from a microscopic perspective or as a single liquid from a macroscopic perspective. Representing mercury in one way does not make the other representation of it false or a "mere appearance". The microscopic perspective may be more accurate in the sense of being more finely grained but that does not make the macroscopic perspective false. They are both realistic but simply represent their object(s) in different ways. They can both be thought to represent the same reality but from different perspectives. They may not be realistic in Rorty's absolute sense but it is precisely that definition of realism that Rorty agrees that we need to overcome. The fact that we describe the world in different ways "for different human purposes" does not oblige us to deny the realism of those descriptions. It is also not a reason to deny that things have properties that are essential or intrinsic to them. We can hold that things (like

mercury) have properties without which they would not be what they are and still maintain that we need a number of different ways to describe what they are.⁴⁹

The idea that a description of reality is defined by a set of contingent anatomical rules is of course familiar from W.V.O. Quine's "Ontological Relativity". To a large extent Quine represents the holist and pragmatist trend in twentieth-century analytic philosophy that Rorty believes his own anti-representationalist pragmatism perfects. The distinctive feature of Rorty's reading of that trend is his insistence that the relativistic and holist thesis that Quine describes prevents us from making any assertion of the realism of our descriptions. This is evident from Rorty's criticism of Quine. Thus, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty castigates the later Quine for falling prey to the kind of metaphysical, reductionist needs that we have seen Rorty associate with realism. For example, in the course of dismissing the language of intentional psychology Quine writes:

If we are limning the true and ultimate structure of reality, the canonical scheme for us is the austere scheme that knows no quotation but direct quotation and no propositional attitudes but only the physical constitutions and behavior of organisms.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ This stratification of reality (and of our representations) is a central feature of Roy Bhasker's account of the way scientific inquiry proceeds: "When a stratum of reality has been adequately described the next step consists in the discovery of the mechanisms responsible for behaviour at that level. The key move in this involves the postulation of hypothetical entities and mechanisms, whose reality can be ascertained. Such entities need not be smaller in size, though in physics and chemistry this has normally proved to be the case. The species of explanation here identified itself falls under a wider genus: in which the behaviour of individuals is explained by reference to their natures and the conditions under which they act and are acted upon." See "Natural Necessity and Natural Kinds: The Stratification of Nature and the Stratification of Science" in *A Realist Theory of Science*, 163-185, p. 169.

⁵⁰ W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 221. Rorty quotes this passage in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 199-200.

Quine privileges the language of physics and contradicts his own claim from “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” that we cannot attach such special status to any of the “posits” that we use to describe the world. Rorty responds as follows:

Why do the *Naturwissenschaften* limn reality while the *Geisteswissenschaften* merely enable us to cope with it? What is it that sets them apart, given that we no longer think of any sort of statement having a privileged epistemological status, but of all statements as working together for the good of the race in that process of gradual holistic adjustment made famous by “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”?⁵¹

Rorty is offended by Quine’s attempt to privilege the language of physics as if there was something “ontologically disreputable” about beliefs and intentions and insists that if Quine held consistently to the holist and pragmatist stance advocated in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” there would be no way that he could claim that physics is uniquely realistic.⁵² The justification for our use of physics would be held to be on a par with the justification for our use of any other language. Rorty insists that being a consistent Quinean holist and pragmatist means that we have no way of knowing which of our vocabularies are especially realistic and so we must be prepared to “take irreducibility in our stride” and “judge each vocabulary on pragmatic or aesthetic grounds” rather than on the grounds that they are realistic.⁵³ Rather than take the irreducibility of our language to mean that reality is not exhaustively represented by any one description, Rorty argues that the irreducibility of our language means that

⁵¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 201.

⁵² Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 206.

⁵³ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 208.

we should entirely give up on the idea that we can realistically represent reality at all.

Rorty's criticism of realism and representationalism is based on a combination of his "metaphysical, reductionist" conception of their approach and an aversion towards attempts to pare our language down to fit such reduction. Rorty argues that his anti-realist pragmatism or "anti-representationalism" is the only viable stance to take because we have no idea which of our terms cut at *the* intrinsic and essential joints in reality and which do not. The fact that Rorty is unprepared to acknowledge that it is unnecessary to take such a reductionist and absolutist approach to realism and representationalism means that his own philosophical stance is itself decisively defined by that reductionism and absolutism. His anti-representationalism, in other words, actually mirrors the representationalist scepticism that he wishes to dissolve and he ends up claiming that our language has no representational relationship to reality at all. There are moments in his writing, and particularly in *Philosophy and the Mirror and Nature*, when he does acknowledge that it is unnecessary to take such a reductionist view of representation. For example, discussing Quine's ontological relativism Rorty writes:

"[...] talk about rabbit-stages and talk about rabbits are talk about the same things (in different ways)".⁵⁴

But Rorty, at the same time dismisses this kind of acknowledgment as merely "common-sensical and philosophically uninteresting" because it goes against the grain of philosophy's self-image as an arbiter of the absolute realism of our

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 197-198.

representations.⁵⁵ The whole thrust of Rorty's argument in *Philosophy and the Mirror and Nature* is aimed at demonstrating that as soon as we start to therapeutically relieve our metaphysical, reductionist needs we begin to rid ourselves of the need for a separate discourse that stands over all other discourses and passes judgment on their absolute realism. Rather than give up the ghost after writing *Philosophy and the Mirror and Nature*, however, Rorty uses that reductionist concept of realism as an object of satire and as a justification that allows him to propose an alternative form of philosophy that positively denies the realist and representational nature of our relationship to the world.

Rorty's anti-realist and anti-representationalist stance arises from a misguided belief that realists are compelled to argue that we need a single and exclusive form of representation to capture reality. According to Rorty, realists are compelled to argue that one exclusive form of representation must capture the way reality is "in-itself" at the expense of the realism of all other forms of representation. He fails to appreciate that realists do not have to absolutely identify reality with a particular representation of it and nor do they have to fall prey to an invidious distinction between reality and the various ways that it "appears". In other words, the problems posed by the binary oppositions of Western metaphysics are reason to abandon those oppositions but are not reason to abandon the model of representation itself. The virtue of Roy Bhaskar's realism, for example, is its acknowledgement that the intelligibility of the scientific enterprise rests on a distinction between the subject-independent reality that science seeks to represent and the various ways that science represents that reality. We need not associate realism with the kind of absolutism and reductionism that Rorty associates it with and the distinction between reality and our representations need not

⁵⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 197.

involve the veil-of-appearances scepticism that he insists that it must. Rorty takes our inability to assure ourselves that any of our descriptions of the world capture reality “absolutely” as a reason to abandon realism and representationalism.

In the next chapter I would like to introduce an example of a less absolutist form of realism. I will do this by giving an account of the developments that took place in Nietzsche’s thought regarding the appearance-reality distinction. This will allow us to further expand our notion of what realism and representationalism entail beyond the narrow terms that Rorty offers. Nietzsche came to conceive of a form of realism that rejects the same Platonic absolutism that Rorty rejects. This is a form of realism that starkly contrasts the earlier scepticism of the essay “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” that Rorty takes inspiration from. I will also draw parallels between this early essay and the position that Quine puts forward in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”. This will allow us to show that Rorty’s restriction of realism to a form of reductionism and absolutism places strain on his attempt to align Donald Davidson’s position with his own.

Chapter 2 - More Eyes, Different Eyes.

From Nietzsche's Early Non-Correspondence Theory of Truth to the Realism of *Twilight of the Idols*

According to Richard Rorty, the representational truth of our linguistic practices is not something that should concern us because when we use language our purpose is not to represent anything. This is why he denies that an objective subject-independent reality has any relevance when it comes to justifying our linguistic behaviour. Returning to Wittgenstein's suggestive metaphor, the relationship between language and the world that Rorty conceives of is one in which the world is caught in a net rather than represented. Rorty argues that our linguistic conventions are justified by their usefulness alone and that the concept of representation is of little use when it comes to appreciating the relationship that our behavioural rules have to the world that they are employed to cope with. In the last chapter my exploration of the similarities between Kant and Rorty's arguments revealed similarities between their challenges to our "mirror-like" representational objectivity. In this chapter I would like to explore other historical precedents for Rorty's thought by proposing that another way of appreciating his position is to consider the similarities and differences between his and Nietzsche's arguments. With this in mind I would like to challenge Rorty's frequent attempts to claim Nietzsche as an ally by describing how Nietzsche rejected the kind of anti-realist stance that Rorty takes and how he overcame an early

“representationalist scepticism” through the development of a form of empirical realism that is reminiscent of W.V.O. Quine’s position in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”. In this way we will see how Rorty’s reading of Nietzsche’s position draws on some early idealist-influenced rhetoric that Nietzsche actually tried to leave behind.

As Maudemarie Clark has pointed out, in his early essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” Nietzsche uses one conception of true representation that conforms to the kind of absolute “mirror-like” objectivity that Rorty identifies with realism.⁵⁶ Nietzsche calls such truth “pure knowledge” or “the correct perception” in order to capture a sense of its imagined perfection.⁵⁷ The problem, for Nietzsche, is that we are not capable of such objectivity and the identification of our understanding with this conception of true representation involves a serious misunderstanding:

[...] how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. [...] it is human, and only its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly – as though the world’s axis turned within it.⁵⁸

Nietzsche subjects the human intellect to a naturalist treatment that questions its ability to “mirror” reality. He thereby, Rorty notes, offers a misanthropic description

⁵⁶ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 63-93. All quotes from Nietzsche early essay come from Daniel Breazeale (ed. and trans.), *Philosophy and Truth, Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870’s* (Humanities Press International, inc. 1990), 78-91.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, pp. 81-86.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, pp. 79-80.

of us as wretched creatures that are “content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things”.⁵⁹ It is a description that could uncharitably be thought to epitomize Rorty’s own unedifying portrait of us as organisms that merely emit “marks and noises”. Rorty would no doubt defend himself by reminding us that we should not take his portrayal of us too seriously as if it captured the real, intrinsic and essential truth about us. The problem is that such a defence only underscores an irony in his disapproval of reductionist philosophy because his own stark physicalist and anti-representationalist description of us involves a similar act of reduction.⁶⁰

In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, Nietzsche satirizes our pretention to objectivity by describing a disjunction in the relationship between the human subject and reality that undermines the kind of mimetic conveyance of likeness that realist empiricists attribute to our experience. He denies that the subject’s experience resembles reality and describes the perceptual mechanism as a chain of non-identical types of representation that leaves the nature of reality mysterious. The term “metaphor” is used by Nietzsche in an unusual psycho-physiological sense to mean perceptual representations as well as figurative linguistic phrases:

To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overlapping of one sphere, right into the

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 80.

⁶⁰ This contradiction is compounded by some of Rorty’s anti-reductionist remarks in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: “[...] ideas in the mind are no more or less disreputable than neurons in the brain, mitochondria in the cells, passions in the soul, or moral progress in history.” Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 208-209.

middle of an entirely new and different one. [...] the mysterious X of the thing in itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound.⁶¹

Nietzsche argues that if our empirical reports require the transmission of a chain of unmirror-like representations (or “metaphors”) then those reports do not accurately reflect the reality that forms the first link in the chain. It is on the basis of this early “artist metaphysic” (to coin a phrase) that Nietzsche makes the definitively sceptical claim that “we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond *in no way* to the original entities.”⁶² This scepticism allows Nietzsche to formulate his famous phrase: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.”⁶³ If “the correct perception” is impossible then we cannot avoid falsifying reality and what we take to be a representation of reality is a *misrepresentation* of it. In Rorty’s terms, the Nietzsche of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” is a representationalist sceptic rather than an anti-representationalist.

It was from Schopenhauer that Nietzsche inherited his early idealist epistemological leanings rather than from a direct encounter with Kant’s first *Critique*.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Nietzsche agrees with Kant that our understanding does not originate in unmediated mimetic empirical experiences because our sensory input does not provide us with the necessary rules for our understanding. In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” Nietzsche declares his Kantian heritage clearly by offering

⁶¹ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, pp. 82-83.

⁶² Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 83. My emphasis.

⁶³ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 84.

⁶⁴ See R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche’s Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of his Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

a naturalised version of Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" in which he states that the form of our empirical experience is not given by a bare empirical input by an *a priori* cognitive structure:

[...] everything marvellous about the laws of nature, everything that quite astonishes us therein and seems to demand our explanation, everything that might lead us to distrust idealism: all this is completely and solely contained within the mathematical strictness and inviolability of our representations of time and space. But we produce these representations in and from ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins [...] the artistic process of metaphor formation with which every sensation begins in us already presupposes these forms and thus occurs within them.⁶⁵

For the Nietzsche of "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", the empirical is imbued with a naturalised and merely subjectively human form of the *a priori*. The early Nietzsche is an empiricist in a "representationalist sceptic" sense. He is certainly not a Lockean or Aristotelian realist empiricist. Aside from his naturalised "Transcendental Aesthetic" our conceptual norms are described by Nietzsche to be abstractions that overlook the "unique and entirely original" character of our experiences.⁶⁶ These linguistic conceptual generalities (what Nietzsche calls "'truth' within the realm of reason") are justified by their "venerability, reliability and utility"

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 87-88.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 83.

and not by their representational accuracy.⁶⁷

In this early unpublished work Nietzsche's own challenge to realist empiricism draws on a naturalised form of idealism. Using a naturalist idiom (rather than Kant's transcendental deductive method) the representations or "metaphors" that we possess are explained by Nietzsche to be specifically human and subjective forms of representation that fail to correspond to a "mysterious X" that is "inaccessible and indefinable for us" and is the true "essence of things" standing behind appearances.⁶⁸ Nietzsche insists that we have no way of representing that essence objectively and that our representations of the world are artificial and illusory. "Metaphors" (in his widened sense of the term) account for both the drive to accumulate conceptual "truths" and our creative drive so that artistic recreations of the world characterise our attempts to represent the world:

The drive toward the formulation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself. This drive is not truly vanquished and scarcely subdued by the fact that a regular and rigid new world is constructed as its prison from its own ephemeral products, the concepts. It seeks a new realm and another channel for its activity, and it finds this in myth and in art generally. This drive continually confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies. It continually manifests an ardent desire to

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 84-85.

⁶⁸ This and the preceding two quotes from Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 83.

refashion the world which presents itself to a waking man, so that it will be as colourful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence, charming, and eternally new as the world of dreams.⁶⁹

This early tendency to assert the primacy of artistry in our cognitive activity is characteristic of Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche. Rorty quotes with approval Nietzsche's early account of our concepts as "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms... which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically".⁷⁰ Yet, it has to be acknowledged that Nietzsche was not content with his early idealist aestheticism for very long. The development of Nietzsche's thought is notable for the contrasting way that he later came to deal with the epistemological problem that is posed by the existence of a subject-independent reality. It is clear from Nietzsche's description of reality as "the essence of things" that, at this early stage, he shares the metaphysical and reductionist concept of realism that Rorty opposes in his own arguments against our representational objectivity. That conception takes reality to comprise an essential nature that appearances fail to represent and so perpetuates a form of scepticism regarding our representations. In Rorty's case, of course, the appearance-reality distinction is only maintained in his writing as part of his portrayal of the undesirable philosophical baggage that comes with being a representationalist. One of the reasons that Rorty advocates Nietzsche's philosophy is that Nietzsche also came to see such baggage as similarly undesirable. Yet, Nietzsche's own strategy for discarding that baggage marks a significant

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 89.

⁷⁰ Rorty quotes this passage from TL in 'Solidarity or Objectivity', *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 21-45, p. 32.

difference between his later philosophy and the early work that Rorty draws on and develops in formulating his anti-representationalist approach. Exploring these differences will prove relevant as a way of appreciating the idiosyncrasies of Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche's work, not to mention the idiosyncrasies of Rorty's own position. With this in mind I would like to describe how Nietzsche overcame his early idealist influences and developed a form of empirical realism. We shall see how Nietzsche's mature *realist* account of the subject's experience renders that experience unsuitable as a bearer of the kind of necessary rules that characterise the Kantian conception of experience. In this way we will be able to appreciate how Nietzsche's Humean (or in his own terms "Heraclitean") conception of the empirical echoes the internal critique of the analytic movement that W.V.O. Quine developed and which Rorty departs from in his advocacy of a return to Nietzsche's earlier idealist-influenced aestheticism. As a first step to appreciating the development of Nietzsche's thought I will start with that "monument of a crisis" which marks Nietzsche's reaction against his early "artist metaphysic".

In contrast to his early aestheticism, Nietzsche opens *Human, All Too Human* with the declaration that he is not interested in the justification of artistic mythological ideas but only in naturalist explanation. He states that we have too easily appealed to a "miraculous origin" for much of what we take to be the case and that this is a failure of explanation and the worst of methods for inquiry.⁷¹ By seeming to justify or explain an idea or phenomenon by appealing to an inscrutable metaphysical reality we actually circumvent the demand for explanation. Metaphysical philosophy is an apology for ignorance and its consequence is the justification of a set of dualisms (for

⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehman (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), §1.

example, freedom versus determinism or the mind versus the body) that fail to provide the kind of integrated account of the world that naturalists strive for. Nietzsche's proposed "chemistry of concepts and feelings" is a naturalist philosophical manifesto that eschews the appeal to a miraculous realm as a means of justifying the use of incompatible ideas. Nietzsche calls for an attempt to reduce the human - by which he means "all those impulses that we ourselves experience in the great and small interactions of cultures and society, indeed even in solitude" (*Human All Too Human* §1) - to a set of known natural elements.⁷² The complete table of chemical elements and their properties is Nietzsche's model for the end of inquiry in psychology and moral science.

This is not to suggest that reality is portrayed as an entirely open book in *Human, All Too Human*. Crucially, Nietzsche warns that the true and ultimate nature of reality may always be too obscure for us to know. The main argument that Nietzsche employs in order to convey the world's ultimate obscurity is that it represents many thousands of years of evolution. The most radical effect that Nietzsche's conception of evolution has on his thought is that it not only endows the object of our understanding with a degree of historical relativity, it endows the faculty of understanding itself with a similar relativity:

A lack of historical sense is the congenital defect of all philosophers.

Some unwittingly even take the most recent form of man, as it developed under the imprint of certain religious or even political events, as the fixed

form from which one must proceed. They will not understand that man has evolved, that the faculty of knowledge has evolved, while some of them even permit themselves to spin the whole world from out of this faculty of knowledge. (*Human All Too Human* §2).

Nietzsche's approach in this passage is similar to the one employed in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense".⁷³ The "faculty of knowledge" is given a naturalist treatment that questions its ability to know reality. Nietzsche's rejection of metaphysical philosophy does not come hand in hand with a belief that we represent reality objectively. According to Nietzsche, our intellect has evolved a specific form that represents the world to us in a particular way. Nietzsche is against metaphysical philosophy because it makes a virtue of the limits of our understanding. It does so by sanctioning an appeal to the miraculous as a justification for the use of unscientific ideas. Through metaphysical philosophy the limits of our understanding become a crutch for groundless metaphysical and religious claims. Against such speculative inquiry, however, the Nietzsche of *Human, All Too Human* does not abandon those limits but draws humility from them.

Nietzsche still uses his early representationalist sceptic notion of "appearances" as a model for the subject's understanding in *Human All, Too Human*. This is typified by his continued and repeated warnings about the specialised and erroneous nature of appearances. In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche describes "all characteristic traits of our world of appearances" as "our inherited idea of the world,

⁷³ Recall Nietzsche's words in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 79: "[the intellect] is human, and only its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly – as though the world's axis turned within it."

spun out of intellectual errors” (*Human All Too Human* §16). “Nature” as an idea is a misrepresentation of reality: “this is perfectly true in respect to the *concept of nature* which we are obliged to apply to her (Nature = world as idea, that is as error), but which is the summation of a number of errors of reason” (*Human All Too Human* §19). Nietzsche declares faith in the ability of science to provide an “*ontogeny of thought*” that will reveal that the world as we know it “is the result of a number of errors and fantasies which came about gradually in the overall development of organic beings” (*Human All Too Human* §16). But he also recognises that it is hard to see how this ontogeny could be developed from our error-strewn perspective. According to Nietzsche we are “unable to break significantly the power of ancient habits” (*Human All Too Human* §16) and it is only by abandoning our intellectual norms that we could approach the genuinely real:

Only very late does the intellect stop to think: and now the world of experience and the thing-in-itself seem so extraordinarily different and separate that it rejects any conclusion about the latter from the former, or else, in an awful, mysterious way, it demands the *abandonment* of our intellect, of our personal will in order to come to the essential by *becoming essential* [...] (*Human All Too Human* §16)

In order to reach behind appearances we would have to abandon our intellect which has made a more essential and objective reality obscure to us. Yet Nietzsche seems to doubt the possibility that such abandonment could provide knowledge. He states that

it could only lift us “for moments” above the process of representation as it could only falsify our intellectual errors without positively correcting them. A form of knowledge that corresponds to a more essential and objective reality is still out of reach in *Human, All Too Human*. The “essence of the world” (*Human All Too Human* §10) still remains beyond our epistemological frontier.

Rather than remain at this impasse, however, Nietzsche’s writings after *Human, All Too Human* start to employ a conception of reality that is less essentialist. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche continues to question our ability to really comprehend reality.⁷⁴ For example, he questions his tentative hope that natural science may overcome the failure of explanation perpetrated by metaphysical inquiry:

Cause and effect. – “Explanation” is what we call it, but it is “description” that distinguishes us from older stages of knowledge and science. Our descriptions are better – we do not explain any more than our predecessors. [...] In every case the series of “causes” confronts us much more completely, and we infer: first, this and that has to precede in order that this or that may then follow – but this does not involve any *comprehension*. In every chemical process, for example, quality appears as a “miracle,” as ever; also, every locomotion; nobody has “explained” a push. But how could we explain anything? We operate only with things that do not exist: lines, planes, bodies, atoms, divisible time spans, divisible spaces. How should explanations be at all possible when we first

⁷⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1974).

turn everything into an *image*, our image! (*The Gay Science* §112)

Here in *The Gay Science* the “miraculous origin” which Nietzsche earlier accuses metaphysics of relying on as an explanatory principle now appears as the questionable origin of the very chemical phenomena that he uses as the paradigm for scientific enquiry in *Human All Too Human*. Nietzsche’s slender hope that we may penetrate deeper than our image-strewn understanding has receded since the writing of *Human, All Too Human*. Nevertheless, despite this continued insistence on the superficial nature of our understanding, Nietzsche shows evidence in *The Gay Science* that he doubts the expedience of the essentialist metaphysics that lay behind the scepticism of his earlier thought. In section fifty four he denies that there is a more essential reality behind appearances:

What is “appearance” for me now? Certainly not the opposite of some essence: what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance! Certainly not a dead mask that one could place on an unknown *x* or remove from it! (*The Gay Science* §54)

Nietzsche argues that the opposition between appearance and “some essence” is a nonsensical one because we could only conceive of such an essence via its appearance. The notion of an essential and remote reality that appearances fail to capture has evidently lost its force for Nietzsche. He asks “whether existence without

interpretation, without “sense,” does not become “nonsense,” whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially actively engaged in *interpretation*” (*The Gay Science* §374). Earlier in his thought Nietzsche rejects the possibility of a view from nowhere or perspective-less representation - what he calls “pure knowledge” or “the correct perception” in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”. *The Gay Science* now denies that there ever was an essential reality for such view to represent.

Excising the notion of an essential nature from the metaphysical world does not rid the metaphysical truth of its meaning altogether for Nietzsche. Despite the fact that he rejects the idea of there being a more essential reality behind our particular perspective he argues that this anti-essentialist truth is truer than the way the world appears to us. Returning in *The Gay Science* to his treatment of the concept of cause, Nietzsche states that “[an] intellect that could see cause and effect as a continuum and a flux and not, as we do, in terms of an arbitrary division and dismemberment, would repudiate the concept of cause and effect and deny all conditionality” (*The Gay Science* §112). In *Beyond Good and Evil* such metaphysical truth is posited more emphatically:

In the “in-itself” there is nothing of “causal connections,” of “necessity,” or of “psychological non-freedom”; there the effect does *not* follow the cause, there is no rule of “law.” It is *we* alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol into things as if it existed “in itself”, we act once more as we have always acted –

mythologically.⁷⁵

Nietzsche here insists that our conceptual norms are a misrepresentation of a fundamental truth. The real metaphysical truth, for Nietzsche, is the world's indeterminacy or its *lack* of any essential nature.

One may wonder how Nietzsche could presume to know such truth given that he is one of us and must see as we do. The answer is that by the time Nietzsche came to write *Beyond Good and Evil* his conception of the way the world appears to us had gone through a change. The conception of appearances that he favours in *The Gay Science* but which is different to ours (that is, the one which repudiates the concept of cause and effect and denies all conditionality) comes to be ours in *Beyond Good and Evil*. His conception of appearances in *Beyond Good and Evil* marks an increasing departure from the early idealist influence that Schopenhauer exerted on his work in favour of a *realist* version of the conception of appearances that he associates with Heraclitus. The “faith of the metaphysicians” that Nietzsche attacks in Part One of *Beyond Good and Evil* is the faith in “*opposite values*” (*Beyond Good and Evil* §2) that Plato articulates in *The Republic* and which seems to have been an idealist reaction by Plato against his own early Heraclitianism.⁷⁶ Seen through the prism of Plato's idealism Nietzsche questions his own idealist influences:

[Kant] was proud of having *discovered* a new faculty in man, the faculty

⁷⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1989), § 21.

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A, chap. 6.

for synthetic judgments, *a priori*. Suppose he deceived himself in this matter; [...] synthetic judgments *a priori* should not be possible at all; we have no right to them; in our mouths they are nothing but false judgments (*Beyond Good and Evil* §11).

Nietzsche still describes the synthetic *a priori* as “necessary for the sake of the preservation of creatures like ourselves” (*Beyond Good and Evil* §11) but his conception of the empirical is one from which the *a priori* can be removed. It is a “transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world” (*Beyond Good and Evil* §2) or, as Aristotle puts it, a world in which “all sensible things are in a state of flux and [...] there is no such thing as knowledge of them.”⁷⁷ The waning of any idealist influence on Nietzsche is obvious in *Beyond Good and Evil*. More than ever before in his work he has pried the idealist *a priori* framework of his earlier thought away from his conception of the empirical to reveal a *realist* version of the kind of Humean or Heraclitean realm of contingency that Kant’s transcendental deduction and Plato’s theory of Forms were designed to circumvent.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche reiterates his belief in the impossibility of genuine explanation by science, although he now clearly values such inquiry for its empirical honesty:

[...] physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and *not* a world-explanation; but insofar as it is

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A, ch. 6.

based on belief in the senses, it is regarded as more, and for a long time to come must be regarded as more – namely, as an explanation (*Beyond Good and Evil* §14).

This guarded respect for empirical science is repeated in *Twilight of the Idols*.⁷⁸ By the time that Nietzsche wrote *Twilight* he had fully realised the implications of his denunciation of idealism and representationalist scepticism. Reality is not distinguished from “mere” appearances in *Twilight*. Reality is the mutable, transitory and contingent nature of the world that experience reveals. Rather than misrepresent a real metaphysical world Nietzsche declares that “so far as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” §3). To the extent that science captures the contingent, transitory and mutable aspect of the sensible world Nietzsche values it:

We possess scientific knowledge today to precisely the extent that we have decided to accept the evidence of the senses [...] Change, mutation, becoming in general were formerly taken as proof of appearance, as a sign of the presence of something which led us astray. Today, on the contrary, we see ourselves as it were entangled in error, *necessitated* to error, to precisely the extent that our prejudice in favour of reason compels us to posit unity, identity, duration, substance, cause, materiality, being; [...] (*Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” §3+5).

⁷⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990).

Empirical experience does not misrepresent an obscured real world and neither does it comply with our conceptual norms. Nietzsche no longer uses the idealist notion of an inescapable *a priori* framework that renders reality obscure. The mature Nietzsche's description of cognition comprises a realist and thoroughly mutable, transitory and contingent empirical element that is distinct from the imposed strictures of "reason".

Calling Nietzsche's view of the empirical in *Twilight* "realist" is misleading if this is meant to suggest that he believes that experience makes available the kind of truth that he put out of the subject's reach in his early thought. His mature rejection of the notion of a remote metaphysical reality is also a rejection of the existence of the kind of *essential* truth that such a notion embodied in his earlier thought. Even though Nietzsche came to believe that we have empirical access to the real world he also came to deny that there is any essential way that that world is. We are not capable of "pure knowledge" of the "essence of things" because, it turns out, there is no such essence. Although the young Nietzsche was initially misled into taking the essentialist metaphysician's problem seriously, for the mature Nietzsche the contingency of our experience reflects the true nature of the world. The sense in which Nietzsche's mature empiricism is realist is the sense in which his conception of the empirical shows it to reveal how everything is really in a state of mutation or "flux". It is as a consequence of his realist anti-essentialism that Nietzsche believes that the principles that govern our reason bear little likeness to the world and our experience of it. Nietzsche's treatment of reason in *Twilight* renders it a fairly blunt instrument. According to him, it "belongs in origin to the age of the most rudimentary form of psychology" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "'Reason' in Philosophy" §5). Reason is a

crude instrument compared to the “delicate tool” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” §3) of the senses. As an attempt to render experience comprehensible reason models the world on a number of abstract grammatical principles and anthropomorphic metaphors. For example, it posits unity and thing-hood and “sees everywhere deed and doer” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” §5). Nietzsche states that the lack of a representational correspondence between our experience and the scheme that our reason provides is what prompts Platonic metaphysicians to believe that reason can refer to a more fundamental reality.⁷⁹ Against such Platonism, Nietzsche argues (specifically referring to logic and mathematics) that reason is a “system of conventional signs” in which “reality does not appear at all, not even as a problem” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” §3). Reason is a means that we developed in order to circumvent our experience of the world’s transitory, mutable and contingent nature. Belief in an alternative “real world” that is represented by reason is unfounded and the problem of whether reason objectively represents such a reality is a pseudo-problem.

Nietzsche overcame the problem of representational scepticism not by taking an anti-realist stance but by adopting a realist and anti-essentialist empiricism that regards reason as a man-made sanctuary from the world’s thoroughgoing contingency. With this in mind I would now like to go on to consider how Nietzsche’s treatment of language and experience echoes the internal critique of the analytic movement that W.V.O. Quine developed and to consider how Rorty’s “anti-representationalist” criticism of Quine’s position results in Rorty’s dismissal of realism in favour of Nietzsche’s earlier idealist-influenced rhetoric.

⁷⁹ See *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” §5.

Nietzsche, Quine, Davidson and Rorty

The last few paragraphs of Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"⁸⁰ read as if they could have been written by Nietzsche:

Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries – not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. [...] The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience. [...] The edge of the system must be kept squared with experience; the rest, with all its elaborate myths and fictions, has as its objective the simplicity of laws.⁸¹

These words read like work that Nietzsche might have produced if he had ultimately elaborated on the need to "sharpen and arm" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "'Reason' in Philosophy" §3) the senses along the lines of the account of physics that he gives in *Beyond Good and Evil*. In this case, language could be seen to be capable of more "delicacy" in its accommodation of the Heraclitean "flux" of experience than Nietzsche suggests in *Twilight*; perhaps by its accommodation of plasticity in posits

⁸⁰ W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 20-46, pp. 42-46.

⁸¹ Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", p. 44-45.

like energy and matter.⁸² Nevertheless, the hypothetical posits and laws of physics are not a representation of an objective truth for Nietzsche or for the Quine of ‘Two Dogmas’. They are “myths and fictions”. The language of physics is a means of marshalling our ideas in a way that merely limits the threat to them that is posed by the contingency of our experience.

The express purpose of Quine’s insistence that our hypothetical posits are not reducible to experience is to criticise the dogma he calls “reductionism”. By “reductionism” Quine means the belief that every meaningful statement is “equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience.”⁸³ It is an assumption that formed the central thesis of Ayer and Carnap’s logical positivism and which in turn formed a central tenet of much of the analytic movement of the twentieth century. Against this movement, Quine denies that our linguistic propositions and terms have empirical content that fixes their truth-value. He believes that the value of our statements and posits is largely determined at a remove from our immediate experience: “The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs [...] is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges.”⁸⁴ Quine points out that the attempt to translate all meaningful statements into ones about immediate experience has precedents in the British empiricism of the Enlightenment. Rather than explain the acquisition of concepts by their genesis in experience Ayer and Carnap were more concerned with fixing the truth-value of linguistic statements by mapping them onto experience. Nevertheless, Quine denies that it is right to speak of the empirical content of statements as if it was experience alone that determines

⁸² Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, p. 45.

⁸³ Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, p. 20.

⁸⁴ Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, p. 42.

whether we hold a statement (or posit) to be justified. Quine regards the justification for our linguistic statements to be more insulated from “the flux of experience” than is suggested by the belief that they are (or should be) a straightforward attempt to represent experience.

By describing the relationship between experience and our “posits” in this way Quine echoes the account of that relationship that Nietzsche offers. Our conceptual apparatus is a means of circumventing “the flux of experience” and is justified by its own legislative authority rather than by its representational objectivity. The justification of any particular statement is contingent on the status and maintenance of the conceptual apparatus that it employs rather than the nature of reality. Quine’s description of “the man-made fabric of language” calls to mind a passage from “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”:

[...] one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water. Of course, in order to be supported by such foundations, his construction must be like one constructed of spiders’ webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind.⁸⁵

Nietzsche anticipates Quine’s description of our concepts as a human construction that is continually adjusted, maintained and added to in an ongoing attempt to maintain its

⁸⁵Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 85.

integrity in spite of our experience. In the same passage, Nietzsche also goes on to illustrate how this post-empiricist position might lead one to claim that we inhabit an intellectual landscape out of touch with reality:

When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding. Yet this is how matters stand regarding seeking and finding “truth” within the realm of reason. If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then after inspecting a camel, declare “look, a mammal” I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value. That is to say, it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be “true in itself” or really and universally valid apart from man.⁸⁶

Nietzsche claims that by crafting our concepts and definitions ourselves we create a set of self-validating rules that do not hold independently of us. Nietzsche uses the rhetoric of myth-making which Quine echoes in his description of the “myth of physical objects”. Both suggest that in our attempts to represent reality reality becomes obscured behind a “man-made” fabrication.

The difference between Nietzsche’s early description of our cognitive apparatus and his later description is that his early description renders reality entirely mysterious. For the early Nietzsche even “the flux of experience” is a “metaphor”

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 85.

that is no less mysterious than any mind-independent world of entities. The objects of our theories have nothing real about them at all in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”. In that essay, our experience is taken to be mere appearance whereas for Quine and the Nietzsche of *Twilight* alike the senses do not lead us astray in that way. Even so, it is clear from Quine’s and Nietzsche’s descriptions of experience that neither man believes that the senses help us very much. The premise that our experience is an indeterminate “flux” is intended to persuade us that the concepts that we apply to the world are an attempt to impose structure and stability where we find none. Both argue that our experience is so indeterminate that we are forced to inhabit our own “more manageable” scheme.⁸⁷ They both advocate a realist conception of experience and so they both stop short of arguing that our means of representation completely obscures the reality that it is intended to represent. Yet, they both give the impression that reality must remain elusive because our attempts to conceptualise it insulate us from its indeterminacy. Quine’s thesis of “ontological relativity” illustrates this very clearly. According to it, the full extent of our conceptual apparatus (including the means by which we individuate objects) is in principle revisable due to the lack of any independent standard for its justification. Consequently, the way that we “slice” the world up (to use Quine’s own metaphor from “Ontological Relativity”) cannot be considered a matter of representing structural features of reality that exist independently of the act of slicing.⁸⁸ Even macroscopic physical objects are “cultural posits” for Quine.⁸⁹

Looking at Quine’s account of our conceptual apparatus in this way brings out

⁸⁷ Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, p. 44.

⁸⁸ W. V. O. Quine, “Ontological Relativity” in *Ontological Relativity and other Essays* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969), 26-68, p. 32.

⁸⁹ Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, p. 44.

those aspects of his position that are well known from Donald Davidson's criticism of the idea of a "conceptual scheme". In his paper "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" Davidson questions whether our inability to say what the objects of our theories are in an "uninterpreted" or "absolute" sense must lead us to regard the act of description as an act of fabrication that insulates us from reality. According to what Davidson calls the "third dogma of empiricism" our conceptual scheme is thought to impose a legislative influence on our thought that mediates our relationship to reality. In this way our means of representation comes to be regarded as eclipsing the reality that it is intended to represent and we are lead into a sceptical form of relativism according to which there is a potential for radically different conceptions of the same ultimately inscrutable reality. The idea of a "conceptual scheme" creates an opposition between reality and our representations and invokes the traditional binary opposition between reality and appearances that has permeated the philosophical tradition and driven it to ponder a wedge between us and reality. Davidson urges us to overcome the tendency to conceive of the act of conceptualisation as an act of obscuration and to remove philosophical obstacles to our "unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false". By relinquishing the notion of an "uninterpreted reality [...] outside all schemes and science" we embrace the reality that is represented by our schemes and science.⁹⁰ We save the notion of objective truth by denying that it stands for an inscrutable metaphysical absolute.

The belief in our need to break down the kinds of intermediaries between our beliefs and reality that create the problem of scepticism gives Davidson a pre-eminent

⁹⁰ Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) 196-208, p. 208.

position in the pantheon of philosophical figures that Rorty advocates. Rorty associates “representationalism” with the kind of philosophy that posits such intermediaries. Rorty’s rejection of the notion of representation is motivated by that association. Yet, as we have seen, Rorty is dogmatic in his association of the notion of objective truth with the same notion of a remote metaphysical absolute that Davidson describes as being correlative with scepticism. According to Rorty, the notion of objectivity stands for a conception of true representation that has it capture such an absolute (as if in a mirror) and the fact that such an absolute is not available means that we must abandon any pretense to realism and objectivity. In his early discussion of Davidson in “The World Well Lost” Rorty describes the “realistic true believer’s notion of the world” as merely a philosophical “obsession”.⁹¹ Rorty claims that by giving up the notion of an “uninterpreted reality outside all schemes and science” we are left with a notion of “the world” as merely “a vast body of platitudes” or “the objects that inquiry at the moment is leaving alone: those planks in the boat which are at the moment not being moved about.”⁹² Despite using Davidson’s arguments against scepticism and conceptual relativism, and despite accepting Davidson’s claim that the vast majority of our beliefs must be true, Rorty defines his own position in a way that rids us of the capacity for objective truth. Rorty’s association of the notion of objectivity with the kind of “mirror-like” representations that supposedly capture *the* way reality is leads him to reject the notion of objectivity altogether. Rather than save the notion of objective truth by denying that it represents a remote metaphysical absolute Rorty advocates Davidson’s linguistic holism as a

⁹¹ Rorty, “The World Well Lost” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 3-18.

⁹² Rorty, “The World Well Lost”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp.14-15.

way of completely abandoning the notion.⁹³

Rorty urges us to accept an anti-representationalist account of our relationship to reality despite the fact that it rules out any sense that we are acquainted with an “an objective public world that is not of our making”.⁹⁴ According to Rorty, such “representationalism” is not worth the trouble because it ends up inserting “imaginary barriers” between the subject’s beliefs and reality.⁹⁵ Rorty’s argument assumes that representationalism necessarily brings with it a distinction between reality and appearances that encourages scepticism and so rather than encourage the sceptic’s doubts (as he assumes representationalism must) Rorty urges us to render those doubts redundant by describing the subject’s relationship to its environment in baldly physicalist and pragmatist terms. The linguistic “marks and noises” that we emit should be regarded as part of the repertoire of tools that our species has developed in practical interaction with its environment rather than as attempts to represent that environment.⁹⁶ Rorty drains language of any representational function and portrays it as merely an observed natural behavior akin to flint knapping. For Rorty, language is simply a phonic and graphic product that is no more “representational” for us than birdsong or a spider’s web.⁹⁷ Paradoxically (or “ironically” as Rorty might say) this

⁹³ Davidson distinguishes his position from Rorty’s in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”. See *Reading Rorty* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1990), 121-138. See also Dorothea Frede, “Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: Rorty on Heidegger and Davidson” in *Richard Rorty*, edited by Alan Malachowski, volume 1 (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 277-295.

⁹⁴ This is Donald Davidson’s phrase from his “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, in *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

⁹⁵ “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 126-150, p. 138.

⁹⁶ See the introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 1-17. Rorty uses the two examples of a lever and a pulley in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 12.

⁹⁷ Nietzsche uses a spider’s web simile in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”. For a birdsong simile see Rorty’s “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 162-172. They call to mind Locke’s opening words in book three of the *Essay* in which he distinguishes human speech from more primitive forms of natural behaviour: “*Man*, therefore, had by nature his organs so fashioned as to be *fit to frame articulate sounds*, which we call words. But this was not enough to produce language; for parrots and several other birds will be taught to make articulate

naturalist and pragmatist stance is not even offered as a representation of reality. It is proposed as simply our most expedient way of speaking because it enables us to avoid positing a metaphysical idol of the tribe like Kant's noumenal world or the "mysterious X" of "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense". It is still merely one conventional set of "marks and noises" among many possible ones. It is just "a disposition to respond in various ways to various stimuli."⁹⁸

Rorty offers an account of the subject's relationship to reality that is strikingly similar to the one that Nietzsche proposes in "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense", except that it is stripped of the "representationalism" that Rorty would insist is responsible for the variety of scepticism that Nietzsche expresses in that early work. Rorty echoes Nietzsche's description of our interaction with the world as a chain of natural causes that do not "mirror" reality. As Nietzsche describes it, it is a chain of nerve stimuli, images and sounds.⁹⁹ For Rorty, it is a network of electrical charges, brain-states, nerve-muscle interfaces and utterances.¹⁰⁰ Both accounts are designed to puncture the "pride connected with knowing and sensing" that both philosophers believe captivates and entraps the realist. In Nietzsche's words the "senses nowhere lead to truth" for "on the contrary [human beings] are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things."¹⁰¹ For Rorty, of course, once we have discarded the Mirror of Nature the sceptical overtones of Nietzsche's description of our relationship to our environment ought to be avoided.

sounds distinct enough, which yet by no means are capable of language." Book III, chapter I, paragraph 1-2. Rorty might argue that the only difference between human language and birdsong is that we find it hard to translate birdsong. See Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 6.

⁹⁸ Rorty, "Inquiry as recontextualisation: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation", *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 98.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 82.

¹⁰⁰ Rorty, "Non-Reductive Physicalism" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 114.

¹⁰¹ This and the quote in the preceding sentence come from "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 80.

According to Rorty, Nietzsche's combination of a physicalist perspective with a form of representationalist scepticism is misguided. Nietzsche's early pragmatism lacks the "anti-representationalism" that Rorty believes should replace the representationalist cultural idiom dominant in the philosophical tradition. Rorty urges us to embrace a view of our linguistic practices that regards those practices as tools rather than representations so that the kind of philosophy that gives rise to the positing of representations and the question of their "mirror-like" objectivity is eradicated from our culture.

In the introduction to his *Essays on Heidegger and Others* Rorty describes his philosophy (and pragmatism in general) as post-Nietzschean because it takes as read Nietzsche's claim that "'knowledge in itself' is as impermissible a concept as 'thing-in-itself'" and that "[the categories of reason] represent nothing more than the expediency of a certain race and species – their utility alone is their 'truth'."¹⁰² But Rorty fails to convey that the terms on which he argues for his pragmatist anti-representationalism are closer to the terms that Nietzsche sets out in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" than to the terms that Nietzsche sets out in *Twilight*. By the time Nietzsche wrote *Twilight* he had abandoned the essentialist conception of reality that we find in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense". The Quinean pragmatism of *Twilight* is based on Nietzsche's conviction that the nature of reality (as revealed by the flux of experience) is indeterminate. For Rorty, by contrast, the concept of reality is bound up with the kind of metaphysical essentialism that Nietzsche expresses in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense". Rorty's position is motivated by his belief that such metaphysical essentialism is merely a philosophical

¹⁰² Rorty, "Introduction: Pragmatism and Post-Nietzschean Philosophy" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 1-6, p. 2. Here Rorty is quoting Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967), §. 608 and 515.

obsession that can be bracketed out to preserve something like Nietzsche's anti-realist position in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense". According to Rorty, once we rid ourselves of "representationalism" and the scepticism that attends it we can rest content with the "conceptual crap game" that Nietzsche describes in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense".¹⁰³ We can accept that our descriptions are justified purely on pragmatic or aesthetic grounds rather than on the grounds that they convey objective truth.

One way of capturing the difference between Rorty's position and Nietzsche's later one is to see Rorty as advocating an anti-realist form of anti-essentialism and the later Nietzsche as advocating a *realist* form of anti-essentialism. This difference can be illustrated by considering Nietzsche's polemic against "the ascetic ideal" in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Here the refusal to believe in the reality of what we hold to be true is identified with the degenerate *ressentiment* of the ascetic priest:

Supposing that such an incarnate will to contradiction and anti-nature is prevailed upon to *philosophize*: on what will he vent his innermost capricious will? On what is most certainly felt to be true, real: he will seek *error* precisely where the true life instinct most unconditionally posits truth.¹⁰⁴

Nietzsche describes universal scepticism as a corrosive consequence of hankering for an absolute truth. Nietzsche goes on to use a concept of "objectivity" in a manner that suggests an alternative to the "metaphysical, reductionist" one that motivates Rorty's

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 85.

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), p. 84.

(and the early Nietzsche's) anti-realism:

For let us guard ourselves better from now on, gentlemen philosophers, against the dangerous old conceptual fabrication that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge” [...] here it is always demanded that we think an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any direction, in which the active and interpretive forces through which seeing first becomes seeing-something are to be shut off, are to be absent [...] There is *only* a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival “knowing”; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our “concept” of this matter, our “objectivity” be. (*On The Genealogy of Morality*, “Third Treatise: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?” §12)

Here Nietzsche advocates an alternative concept of objectivity to the reductionist, essentialist and “non-perspectival” one that he satirizes and that Rorty identifies with representational realism. This alternative concept of objectivity denies that there is only one way of truthfully representing reality and holds that the more representations we have of reality the more we get to know it as a whole. It accepts the partial or “perspectival” nature of representation without assuming that this must rule out our objectivity. Nietzsche argues that the ideal of a pure, non-perspectival or single “mirror-like” form of representation that captures *the* way reality is has always been a myth and that despite this realization we should not abandon the belief in realism or

objectivity. In contrast, Rorty never entertains such a non-reductive form of realism. Rorty embraces Nietzsche's perspectivism while assuming that it is incompatible with realism. Where Nietzsche urges us to train more eyes, different eyes, on reality, Rorty closes us off from reality:

You can dissolve macrostructure into microstructure – stars and tables into atoms [...] The antiessentialist specializes in creating this hall-of-mirrors effect – in getting us to stop asking which is the real thing and which the image, and to settle for an ever-expanding choice of images.¹⁰⁵

When Rorty uses the rhetoric of representation he invokes the kind of veil-of-appearances scepticism that is familiar from “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” – the very kind that Nietzsche came to find unsatisfactory and reject. According to Rorty, once we have accepted the truth of perspectivism then reality must drop out if the picture and the Mirror of Nature must become an endless “hall-of-mirrors”. For the Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morality*, by contrast, the contingent nature of particular representations does not rule out their realism. Rorty's dogmatism regarding the oppositional traditions of “representationalism” makes his anti-reductionism anti-realist whereas Nietzsche's lack of such dogmatism allows him to conceive of a realist form of anti-reductionism.

In the next chapter I will continue my comparison between Rorty and Nietzsche by exploring Rorty's theory of metaphor. Rorty regards metaphor as the driving force behind our intellectual advances. He uses the concept of metaphor in

¹⁰⁵ Rorty, “Inquiry as recontextualisation: An anti dualist account of interpretation” in *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, 93-110, p. 100.

order to provide an anti-realist explanation of intellectual change. We have seen that Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche relies on his reading of "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense" and his theory of metaphor borrows from it directly. He argues that the creation of a metaphor always involves an act of contrivance that compromises its realism. Rorty's notion of the unrealistic nature of metaphor is further evidence of his narrow Platonic conception of what realism entails and I will consider Aristotle's theory of metaphor as an alternative. I will also discuss some of the advantages of entertaining a less absolutist conception of realism and representationalism as an alternative to Rorty's anti-representationalism.

Chapter 3 - Metaphor as the Vanguard of the Species

Philosophy and the Kaleidoscope of Nature

I have been arguing that Richard Rorty's rejection of the model of representation is motivated by too narrow a conception of what it means for a representation to be realistic. Rorty associates the doctrine of realism with a belief in a privileged form of representation that captures *the* way that reality is as if there could be a single and exclusive form of representation that captured all there is to reality. I have also tried to show that one of the remarkable features of Nietzsche's intellectual career is that he broke away from this philosophical dogma and began, with the notion of perspectivism, to use the term "objectivity" in a new way. Nietzsche conceives of a form of objectivity that acknowledges the partiality of our representations but does not regard that partiality as a bar to objectivity. Rather than contrast our representations with something more absolute it overcomes their partiality by having them participate in a more complete whole. This view stands in stark contrast to the one Nietzsche expresses in his early unpublished essay "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense". The early Nietzsche is totally in thrall to the idea of objectivity that demands transcendence. It demands a pure, perfect and "mirror-like" form of representation that captures "the essence of things" and he denigrates the human subject for the inadequacy of its representations. Often when Rorty refers to Nietzsche's influence on his own thought he cites "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral

Sense”. Rorty gives full support to the anti-realist account of metaphor that Nietzsche puts forward in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” and claims that it lends credence to his own belief in our lack of “objectivity”. Rorty is convinced that the sceptical outlook of “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” can be spun into a positive affirmation of our creativity once we abandon our illusory hope of obtaining objectivity.

Having touched on Rorty’s advocacy of Nietzsche’s early aestheticism in the last chapter I would now like to examine it more closely in this chapter. To do so I will continue my comparison between Rorty and the early Nietzsche by focusing on their accounts of the role of metaphor in our thought. This will involve an exploration of their aestheticism in the wider context of their naturalism and physicalism because their accounts of metaphor draw on their wider conception of the human subject’s relationship to the natural world. Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” gives the human subject a naturalist treatment that rules out the possibility of realist representation and describes the subject’s cognitive apparatus as a body of “metaphors” that *mis*represent reality. Similarly, Rorty argues for a physicalist and pragmatist account of the subject’s relationship to reality that denies that the subject’s linguistic utterances “mirror” reality. There is no sense for either of them in which the subject is able to “speak of things as they are”¹⁰⁶, to use John Locke’s literal-minded phrase, and as an anti-realist alternative they both turn what they perceive to be the traditional authority of the literal over the metaphorical (and the scientific over the aesthetic) on its head. According to both Rorty and Nietzsche alike, it is inventive

¹⁰⁶ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton (London: Everyman, 1990), Book III, Chap. X.

metaphorical conceits that form the vanguard of the subject's cultural and intellectual life rather than attempts to represent the world as it "really" is.¹⁰⁷

Rorty denies that there are any sceptical implications to his anti-realism by claiming that the problem of scepticism is caused specifically by the realist standards of representation that thinkers like Locke advocate. Rorty argues that realism has the effect of undermining itself by introducing a standard of objectivity that is unattainable. It forces us to make a distinction between our representations and a more objective reality that inevitably places a veil-of-appearances between us and that reality. Rorty's anti-representationalism is simply intended to change our conception of language from one that ties it to the sort of representationalist model that puts reality at a remove from us to one that treats it as a practical tool in direct causal contact with reality. Yet, in the course of rejecting representationalism Rorty strips language of its ability to refer to the world beyond our linguistic behaviour. Any notion of our language having a representational function that keeps us in touch with "an objective public world that is not of our making" is lost. Rorty erases any meaningful relationship that our language may have to an objective world and confines us within what he calls a transient and culturally contingent "metaphoric".¹⁰⁸ Rather than conceive of the aim of inquiry as a matter of representing reality Rorty advocates a belief in the importance to our intellectual advances of novel and unusual combinations of linguistic terms that have no realism.

The purpose of Rorty's insistence on the ubiquity of metaphor is to challenge the presumption that we are able to deal in a kind of plain literal language that avoids

¹⁰⁷ See Alessandra Tanesini, "The 'Spider's Web' and the 'Tool': Nietzsche *vis-à-vis* Rorty on Metaphor" in *Nietzsche: A Critical Reader*, edited by Peter R. Sedgwick (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 276-293.

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 28.

metaphor. This insistence is part of his attempt to persuade us to abandon the belief in our objectivity and so it implicitly assumes that metaphors lack objectivity in their very nature. Throughout my criticism of Rorty I have argued that his attempt to reject traditional philosophical dogma suffers from the respect that he pays that dogma. In the case of the literal-metaphorical contrast the situation is no different. The idea that metaphors lack realism and objectivity comes from the same philosophical opposition that he wishes to set aside and thereby overcome. Rorty's anti-realist radicalism actually depends on that opposition, as we can see towards the end of his paper "Non-Reductive Physicalism" in which he claims that his insistence on the unavoidability of metaphor puts him at odds with the Western realist tradition. He states that Western philosophy has tended to treat metaphor as a "dangerous enemy":

It has made much of the contrast between "literal truth" conceived of as "correspondence to reality" and "*mere* metaphor", where the latter is thought of as an alluring, seductive, dangerous temptation – a temptation to "escape from reality". This literal-metaphorical contrast lies in the background of the opposition, characteristic of the post-Kantian period in philosophy between science and art.¹⁰⁹

Rorty wishes to advocate the kind of revaluation of metaphor that Nietzsche attempts in TL by showing that it is not a "dangerous temptation" at all but a necessary part of our cognitive toolkit. He wants to insist that the methods of science and art are not as distinct as some would like to believe. Yet, in the course of arguing that science deals in metaphor as much as art Rorty leaves in place the belief that metaphors do not

¹⁰⁹ Rorty, "Non-Reductive Physicalism" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 113-125, p. 125.

represent reality. He tries to change the way that he believes tradition values metaphor without changing what he perceives to be its second-rate cognitive status and so he perpetuates the opposition as much as he tries to challenge it.

Attempts to invest our linguistic practices with a fixed, plain literal meaning are rejected by Rorty as abortive foundational philosophical attempts to provide an “Archimedean point” for our historically and culturally contingent linguistic practices. In response to such foundationalism Rorty insists that our terms have a long and polysemous past and that their meanings are the result of a number of contingent metaphorical transfers. Rorty quotes with approval, in this context, Nietzsche’s early account of our terms as “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms... which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically”.¹¹⁰ In contrast to the literal-minded model of inquiry that Locke proposes, this insistence on the importance of metaphor is intended to persuade us of the inventive and “unrealistic” character of our combinations of terms. Locke’s attitude to figurative modes of expression is notoriously disparaging because of this contrast:

[...] if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats... [and] they are certainly, in

¹¹⁰ Rorty quotes this passage from “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” in “Solidarity or Objectivity”, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 21-45, p. 32.

all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided.¹¹¹

Locke states that in order to convey knowledge we must adhere to a tight correspondence between what we say and the literal truth. By using rhetorical devices like metaphor we disregard such truth and “insinuate wrong ideas”. Rorty’s position, however, rules out the possibility of attaching the kind of objective literal meaning to our linguistic practices that Locke proposes. According to Rorty, as far as representationalist realists are concerned we cannot avoid misleading our powers of judgment. Similarly to the Nietzsche of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, Rorty makes a claim for the ubiquity of metaphor in order to eradicate any realist meaning from our utterances. According to Rorty, all expressions were once metaphorical and the ones that we regard as literal have simply lost the novelty and the unreality (or meaninglessness) that they once had.

Locke would seem to put an unreasonable restriction on us given the pervasiveness of metaphorical expressions in our language and Rorty draws on these incessant transpositions within our discourse in order to deny that we can speak plainly and objectively in the way that Locke implies. Rorty’s definition of metaphor goes so far as to evoke Nietzsche’s early and unusual physiological use of the term to refer to the human subject’s cognitive apparatus in general.¹¹² In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” Nietzsche defines metaphors as acts of misrepresentation and argues that *all* of our forms of representation arise from acts of distortion that make them metaphors. The term “metaphor” stands for any such act in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”. It stands not just for our acts of figurative linguistic phrasing

¹¹¹ Locke, *Essay*, Book III, Chap, X.

¹¹² Rorty, “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 162-172.

but for the whole physiological operation that goes into cognition. The thesis of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” is that we distort reality at such a root sensory level that cognition is always a product of misrepresentation that can never correctly represent reality (the “mysterious X”). Rorty’s own anti-realism evokes this wholesale approach of Nietzsche’s. In his paper “A World Without Substances or Essences”, for example, Rorty denies that our concept of “an object” has any real meaning. He states that it is just a hypostatization of the linguistic subject (just as Nietzsche calls it a “basic presupposition of the metaphysics of language”).¹¹³ Rather than represent the world “objectively” we obscure the world and transform it into something of our own creation.

Rorty would remind us that any talk of distortion or misrepresentation should not be taken seriously as if describing the world involved representing it. Rorty’s presumably ironic forays into conventional sounding discussions of metaphor should always be understood against the background of his anti-representationalism. For Rorty, the fact that it is not possible to isolate a form of representation that captures the way things are “essentially, intrinsically and in-themselves” means that we ought to do away with the model of representation entirely. Rorty eliminates any mechanism of representation from his conception of the human intellect and reduces language to a collection of “marks and noises” in order to discourage our tendency to treat our sentences as representations. In turn, Rorty abandons representationalist theories of meaning and adopts an anti-representationalist version of Wittgenstein’s concept (or metaphor) of the “language-game”¹¹⁴. In Rorty’s view, using language is

¹¹³ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 48.

¹¹⁴ Rorty rejects representationalist models of linguistic meaning altogether, unlike Wittgenstein who merely denies that they represent “the essence of human language”. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), § 1.

like participating in any kind of rule governed behavior and has no special representational function. An utterance's place in such a pattern of behaviour constitutes its meaning and any deviation from that pattern is nonsense. In order to make sense we must confine ourselves to "the quite narrow (though stifling) limits of regular, predictable, linguistic behavior".¹¹⁵ As far as metaphors are concerned, according to Rorty, they are simply unfamiliar marks or noises that disturb the usual pattern of our utterances. Novel metaphorical sentences "make no sense" because they combine linguistic terms in ways that diverge from the current conventions of use.¹¹⁶

Expanding on his anti-representationalist account of language Rorty explains the role of metaphor by using what he regards as a Davidsonian account of the difference between the literal and the metaphorical. According to Davidson, metaphorical sentences have no meaning besides the literal meaning that we impute to them and it is for this reason that a metaphor cannot be paraphrased. Davidson says that metaphors "intimate much that goes beyond the literal meaning of the words. But intimation is not meaning."¹¹⁷ For meaning to be found in a metaphor it has to be translated into something that makes literal sense whereas, on the face of it, metaphors do not make such sense.¹¹⁸ Rorty interprets this view as follows:

by putting metaphor outside of the pale of semantics, insisting that a metaphorical sentence has no meaning other than its literal one, Davidson

¹¹⁵ Rorty, "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor", in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 162-172, p. 164.

¹¹⁶ Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as metaphor, and as politics", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 9-26, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean", in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 29-45, p. 39.

¹¹⁸ Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean", p. 44.

lets us see metaphors on the model of unfamiliar events in the natural world – *causes* of changing beliefs and desires – rather than on the model of representations.¹¹⁹

Rorty interprets Davidson as having argued that metaphors do not initially have literal meaning but gain it by asserting a causal pressure to change what we take to be literally meaningful. Metaphors fall outside of the “narrow limits” of regular, predictable, linguistic behavior and cause shifts in this narrow antecedent scheme. They are unfamiliar and meaningless utterances that do not convey truths within the antecedent limits of literal meaning but come to alter what we take to be literally meaningful.¹²⁰

Rorty argues that Davidson enables us to think of intellectual history as a form of blind natural selection in which novel and nonsensical ways of using language come into existence by chance and kill off old ones only to be replaced by further new generations that, rather than converge on the real truth, create ever more varied forms of life: “as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niche), as are the orchids and the anthropoids.”¹²¹ Rorty’s Darwinian view of intellectual history actually owes more to his reading of Thomas Kuhn than Donald Davidson:

[...] the resolution of [scientific] revolutions is the selection by conflict within the scientific community of the fittest way to practice future

¹¹⁹ Rorty, “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 162-172, p. 163.

¹²⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 167.

¹²¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 16.

science. [...] And the entire process may have occurred, as we now suppose biological evolution did, without the benefit of a set goal, a permanent fixed scientific truth, of which each stage in the development of scientific knowledge is a better exemplar.¹²²

Rorty sees in Davidson's account of metaphor a metaphor for the kind of accidental and contingent variation that fuels biological evolution and he co-opts that account into the service of a starkly mechanistic version of Kuhn's non-teleological reading of scientific history in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹²³ For Rorty, intellectual revolutions involve "metaphoric re-descriptions" that are mutations in the genetic code of language caused by the same sorts of "blind, contingent, mechanical forces" that shape other natural phenomena.¹²⁴ Some catch on and define a generation and others do not but there is no Mirror of Nature that guides the process.

As with all of Rorty's re-descriptions of his philosophical influences, his interpretations of Davidson and Kuhn are much like metaphorical conceits themselves. Rorty presents the arguments of both men through the filter of his own particular philosophical commitments and in doing so he alters the way we see their arguments. The unique slant that Rorty puts on his interpretations of these two thinkers is encapsulated by his suggestion that novel metaphors and new descriptions of the world are meaningless in the strongest sense. That is, that they do not just say things that are unusual but do not say anything meaningful at all. Rorty seems to be

¹²²Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 171-173.

¹²³ Kuhn describes his account of scientific history as non-teleological in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, pp. 60-73.

¹²⁴ The phrase "metaphoric re-description" comes from Mary Hesse, "The Explanatory Function of Metaphor", in *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). Rorty quotes Hesse at *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 16. The other quote in this sentence comes from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 17.

aware of the strain that this interpretation puts on Davidson's original thesis:

Davidson does, occasionally, say things which seem to support the view that metaphors have "cognitive content". For example: "Metaphors often make us notice aspects of things we did not notice before; no doubt they bring surprising analogies and similarities to our attention."¹²⁵

Davidson's original argument was designed to show only that metaphors do not have a special kind of meaning that is irreducible to literal interpretation. Rorty, however, associates such acts of literal interpretation with a conventionalism that fails to do justice to the novel character of metaphorical expressions. Even though Rorty agrees with the positivist principle that the meaning of an expression is exhausted by its literal interpretation he has preconceptions about the conventional nature of literal meaning that lead him to claim that in order to convey the role of metaphorical expressions it is necessary to give them potential significance beyond any literal interpretation.¹²⁶ In the course of appropriating Davidson's argument Rorty interprets Davidson himself as having also given them such significance. In actual fact, Davidson's argument is designed specifically to deny metaphors such significance. To put it bluntly, Davidson does not share Rorty's belief that in order to say something new it is necessary to talk nonsense.

Rorty's account of the non-cognitive nature intellectual creativity also colours his interpretation of Kuhn's work. Rorty sees support for his account of intellectual

¹²⁵ Rorty, "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor", in *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, 162-172, p. 167. Rorty is quoting Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 247.

¹²⁶ These Romantic notions about the nature of intellectual genius are exemplified by Rorty's characterisation of the cultural role of the poet in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

innovation in Kuhn's observation that very often a change in our scientific outlook comes about when a description of the world that originally seems absurd gains influence and becomes the norm:

Kuhn's examples of "revolutionary" change in science were, as he himself remarked... cases in which a scientist has said something which sounds so silly that it is hard to believe that we have understood him properly.¹²⁷

Kuhn observes that the history of scientific advancement does not simply involve the accumulation of scientific facts but involves periodic transformations in theory that confound previous notions of what is fact. These "revolutions" are marked by moments in history when scientists propose things that seem absurd in the context of current theory and Rorty claims that this confirms his belief that the novel propositions that cause changes in our intellectual outlook are originally meaningless. As with Davidson's theory of metaphor, however, Rorty's reading of Kuhn skews his original argument. Kuhn never denies that history's revolutionary propositions were meaningful in the minimal sense of being comprehensible. For example, even though Kuhn observes that the proposition that the Earth moves around the sun seemed absurd in the context of sixteenth century belief he does not deny that it was a comprehensible proposition. Rorty, by contrast, does make such assertions when he combines his stark Darwinian account of intellectual history with his understanding of the non-cognitive nature of intellectual innovation:

To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game. Metaphors, by

¹²⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.323.

definition, do not. [...] Uttering a sentence without a fixed place in a language-game is, as the positivists rightly have said, to utter something which is neither true nor false. [...] But this is not to say that it may not, in time, *become* a truth-value candidate.¹²⁸

According to Rorty, intellectual revolutions occur when eccentric geniuses utter sentences that do not initially mean anything but cause alterations in our linguistic conventions so that they come to be regarded as literally meaningful. New “metaphoric re-descriptions” become understood not as a result of being given a literal interpretation but by changing what we take to be literally meaningful in the first place.

Ironically, given Rorty’s professed support for Davidson’s rejection of the idea of a conceptual scheme, Rorty’s interpretation of Kuhn’s argument emulates the unsympathetic interpretation that Davidson gives in “On the Very the Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”.¹²⁹ The idea that in the course of an intellectual revolution our understanding can alter so radically that what was once meaningless becomes meaningful evokes the idea of radical conceptual variance that Davidson finds untenable. Such revolutions are not just a case of taking something to be true that was not previously thought to be so. They are cases in which our understanding alters to the extent that what was completely meaningless for us becomes meaningful to us. According to Davidson, when Kuhn talks of scientists “working in different worlds” before and after a scientific revolution and of them having “incommensurable” conceptual paradigms he is positing this kind of fundamental conceptual difference:

¹²⁸ See *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 16.

¹²⁹ Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, in *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) 196-208.

Kuhn [...] wants us to think of different observers of the same world who come to it with incommensurable systems of concepts. [...] “Incommensurable” is, of course [Kuhn’s] word for “not intertranslatable”.¹³⁰

In fact, it is not at all certain that Kuhn meant what Davidson takes him to mean by the term “incommensurable”. In the postscript of the third edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for example, Kuhn acknowledges that communication problems between people who hold incommensurable beliefs can be resolved through translation.¹³¹ Both parties can understand each other’s positions even though they disagree over which to believe. Nevertheless, Rorty is led by the logic of his understanding of the non-cognitive nature of intellectual innovation into making the same conflation that Davidson accuses Kuhn of making. For Rorty, “incommensurable” does mean “not intertranslatable”. Although Rorty tries to defend Kuhn in the face of Davidson’s criticism Rorty reads Kuhn in the same way that lead to that criticism in the first place because he adopts a theory of intellectual innovation that is un-Davidsonian.

As far as Davidson is concerned, the role that metaphors play in our culture can be captured without supposing that they have significance besides the literal translation that we give to them. The role of metaphors (besides startling us) is to suggest analogies and similarities that do make literal sense and so it is wrong to deny them such translatability and sense. As I have already intimated, part of the reason

¹³⁰ Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, pp. 199-202.

¹³¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, pp. 198-204.

why Rorty does deny them such translatability and sense is that he wants to preserve the idea of varying “conceptual schemes”. In order to define the character of a metaphoric re-description Rorty believes that it is necessary to deny them the meaning that the property of translatability confers. To posit such translatability would be to posit the existence of an antecedent understanding for them to conform to and would suggest that our concepts are not as mobile an army as Rorty is inclined to believe they are. Even though Rorty often endorses Davidson’s claim that our “conceptual scheme” is largely stable, Rorty’s theory of metaphor leaves that endorsement sounding vacuous. As I stated in the last chapter, as far as Rorty is concerned all of our concepts are “planks in the boat” that can be moved about. What we take to be meaningful is freely open to change through the acceptance of any new combination of terms. If our language is just a disposition to respond in various ways to various stimuli then there is no telling what that response could be.

Rorty encourages us to believe that nothing constrains us from accepting any new metaphor. Such constraint would suggest that we are qualified to decide what is literally true and what is not in advance of an innovation. Rorty associates the belief in such a qualification with a form of realism that aims to constrain our use of metaphor and he sees no way to appreciate our use of metaphor without abandoning realism. According to Rorty, metaphor delivers what might be termed a kaleidoscope of different descriptions that confounds our attempt to conceive of a single and essential form of literal description. What we take to be literally meaningful is continually changing because, to quote Nietzsche, our use of metaphor “continually confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new transferences,

metaphors and metonymies.”¹³² Davidson, on the other hand, suggests that this perceived confusion is an illusion. Rather than take metaphors at face value and be so confused Davidson proposes that we understand metaphors by translating them into our underlying grasp of what makes literal sense. Davidson suggests that the use of metaphor is compatible with realism because rather than confuse our sense of what is literal and meaningful it actually relies on it by representing reality in an unusual but still meaningful way. Even though Davidson denies that metaphors have a special kind of meaning that is irreducible to literal interpretation he suggests that we can entertain an alternative to Rorty’s Platonic conception of the non-cognitive nature of metaphor. In fact, by considering one particular contemporary rival to Plato’s position on the cognitive status of metaphor we can challenge Rorty’s insistence that a belief in the significance of metaphor must put us at odds with realism.

Footnotes to Aristotle

Often, Rorty cites Jacques Derrida as a key figure in the fight for freedom from the Platonism that he believes holds the realist captive.¹³³ Rorty appropriates the argument of Derrida’s “White Mythology” in order to challenge the presumption that we are able to deal in a kind of literal language that avoids metaphor. In attacking that presumption Rorty assumes that Derrida intends to extinguish our pretension to realism. Yet, it would be wrong to think that Derrida’s treatment of metaphor complements Rorty’s. It can be argued that Derrida actually offers an alternative for realists. This is illustrated by the fact that the accounts of the anti-realist character of

¹³² Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 89.

¹³³ Rorty, “Non-Reductive Physicalism” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 113-125, p. 125.

metaphor that Rorty and the early Nietzsche both give make them resolutely un-Aristotelian. The representationalist concept of truth is central to Aristotle's account of what makes a good metaphor in the *Poetics*. Derrida sums up Aristotle's position in "White Mythology":

The definition of metaphor is in its place in the *Poetics*, which opens as a treatise on *mimēsis*. *Mimēsis* is never without the *theoretical* perception of resemblance or similarity, that is, of that which will always be posited as the condition for metaphor. *Homoiōsis* is not only constitutive of the value of truth (*alētheia*) which governs the entire chain; it is that without which the metaphorical operation is impossible. "To produce a good metaphor is to see a likeness." The condition for metaphor (for good and true metaphor) is the condition for truth [...] Metaphor, thus, as an effect of *mimēsis* and *homoiōsis*, the manifestation of analogy, will be a means of knowledge.¹³⁴

Derrida's point here is that, for Aristotle, a good metaphor is a kind of representation that conveys real truth because it relies for its success on a likeness to whatever it represents. Aristotle argues that although by using metaphors we may combine ideas in ways that seem to confound literal sense we do not necessarily "insinuate wrong ideas" by means of them. On this view "speaking of things as they are" in Locke's restrictive literal-minded sense is not the only way to inform or instruct. By bringing ideas together against the grain of Locke's approach metaphors can be found to shed a

¹³⁴ Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207-71, p. 237-8.

revealing light on reality.

Christopher Norris has elaborated on Derrida's discussion of Aristotle in the following way:

[...] it is precisely the virtue of 'good' metaphors to provide a basis for analogical reasoning from things already known to things whose properties can best be inferred through the perception of resemblance or natural-kind affinity. In other words, there is always a mimetic component in the process of knowledge-acquisition, whatever those subsequent stages of advance that enable thinking to reduce its dependence on "naive" or "unrectified" images, metaphors, and modes of perceptual-intuitive grasp.¹³⁵

Norris argues that the practices of mimetic representation, comparison and metaphorical transference are fundamental to our cognitive achievements. The metaphorical application of familiar ideas allows us to grasp unfamiliar things in our efforts to understand them. The notion of "rectification" that Norris employs here comes from the work of the French philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem who has made a study of the way that figurative expressions (for example "tissue" or "cell") are applied within the scientific field before extended and closer study of the relevant objects produces more particular concepts.¹³⁶ On this view, metaphors can be an aid to realist scientific inquiry rather than a hindrance to it. They can aid the

¹³⁵ See Christopher Norris, *New Idols of the Cave: on the Limits of Anti-realism* (Manchester and New York: MUP, 1997), pp-106-110. Norris quotes the above passage from "White Mythology".

¹³⁶ Derrida and Norris quote Georges Canguilhem, *La Connaissance de la vie* (Paris: Vrin, 1969), pp. 64-5. See "White Mythology", p. 263 and Norris, *New Idols*, pp. 87+8.

“extended process of conceptual assimilation” that Kuhn describes as facilitating scientific discovery.¹³⁷

Aristotle’s realist challenge to Plato’s position on the cognitive status of metaphor is especially pertinent when considering Nietzsche’s account of the formation of concepts in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (that most eclectic of philosophical treatises) because Nietzsche draws on a parody of Plato’s idealism in his derisive portrayal of the knowledge that supposedly arises from our attempt to perceive kinds. According to the early Nietzsche, our concepts of kinds are combinations of empirical ideas that have been forced together. They are “coins that have lost their embossing”.¹³⁸ By forming concepts we express “one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing” and hypostatize those choices as if they expressed “the essence of things”.¹³⁹ For example the formation of our concept of leaves “awakens the idea that, in addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the “leaf”: the original model according to which all leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, coloured, curled, and painted – but by incompetent hands, so that no specimen has turned out to be a correct, trustworthy, and faithful likeness of the original model.”¹⁴⁰ In this way we are removed from the “unique and entirely individual” nature of things. In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, Nietzsche employs a parody of Plato’s idealism in order to satirize our attempts at conceptualizing the sensible world and insists that our concepts can only dislodge us from the world and confine us in a realm of illusion.¹⁴¹ Nietzsche shows no sign of Aristotle’s belief that our effort to understand the world through our perception of

¹³⁷ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 56.

¹³⁸ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 84.

¹³⁹ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 82.

¹⁴⁰ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 83.

¹⁴¹ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, p. 84-85.

kinds may provide knowledge. Nietzsche shares Plato's "Heraclitean" conception of the irredeemably contingent, transitory and mutable nature of the sensible world. Any attempt to posit such kinds contradicts the "flux of experience". All that we can do is contrive to create some order out of the chaos by supposing that some of our metaphors form more stable "concepts".

In "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" Nietzsche associates realism with belief in a pure and correct form of representation that captures "the essence" of reality and in the absence of such a form of representation he states that "we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond *in no way* to the original entities."¹⁴² Nietzsche insists that realism requires a purer and more correct form of representation than mere metaphors provide. Metaphors draw analogies between diverse things and in doing so they confound our attempts to define the essence of those things. They present a plethora of diverse analogies that "continually confuses the conceptual categories."¹⁴³ When it comes to representing reality the fact that we employ different forms of representation means that the "correct" or "pure" form that (he assumes) realism demands eludes us. In order to represent reality we have to employ some kind of "metaphor". The problem for the early Nietzsche and for Rorty is that neither can conceive of a form of realism that accommodates this kind of contingency. Such an impure form of realism is contrary to philosophical doctrine as they see it. Plato's cave allegory is canonical for both men and while we remain in the cave amongst shadows scepticism is the only option. This is why Rorty prefers to deny the representational nature of language altogether. If transcendence or scepticism is all that representationalist realism allows then it is better to change our

¹⁴² Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 83. My emphasis.

¹⁴³ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", p. 89.

story and deny that our language is meant to represent anything in the first place.

What Aristotle's philosophy offers, on the other hand, is a line that is not so divided. Holding the standard of *homoiōsis* to be constitutive of the value of truth creates a kind of realism that is less of an all or nothing affair. It enables us to conceive of a form of representation that has truth and realism without being "mirror-like" in an absolute sense. Metaphors, for example, may analogize things that are not identical but can still possess truth and meaning by virtue of a likeness between those things. The standard of realism then becomes more a matter of likeness than of perfect "mirroring". This is true not only of metaphors in our conventional sense of the term but also in Nietzsche's wider sense. Whatever form of representation we consider we can regard it as capable of being realistic and challenge Nietzsche's assumption in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" that scepticism is inevitable in the absence of a pure form of representation. We can deny Nietzsche's assumption in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" that the "metaphorical" nature of our representations must render reality mysterious and suppose that we can represent reality using different representations while still remaining realistic. Reality then becomes not so remote as to be completely mysterious but not so inconsistent as to be identified with its various representations. In this way we can maintain a distinction between the subject-independent reality that we represent and the various ways that we represent that reality without succumbing to scepticism.

Plato described the cave of his famous allegory as a theatrical space that is cut off from reality. The prisoners inside the cave observe shadows on the wall that are cast by artificial objects. In order to know reality it is necessary for the prisoners to escape the cave and confront reality directly. A less absolutist realism, on the other

hand, might imagine people observing likenesses of real objects. Those likenesses could be thought to inform us about the nature of reality. With this less absolutist approach we could retain realism as a standard against which we judge competing representations. Real objects could be thought to have an intrinsic nature that we can be right or wrong about without requiring a single absolute representation of that nature. This preserves the kind of kaleidoscope of meaning that makes metaphor such a rich descriptive form while restricting the “anything goes” aestheticism that Rorty and the early Nietzsche seem to advocate. In this way we could achieve Rorty’s stated aim of laying Plato’s allegory to rest without abandoning the notion of representation and of a reality to be successfully or unsuccessfully represented. We would no longer be able to imagine ourselves judging our representations from an absolute standpoint but that would not invalidate the standard of realism *tout court*.

In his paper “Inquiry as Recontextualisation: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation” Rorty sums up an opposing argument to his position in the following way:

The essentialist rejoins by saying that although the descriptions may vary depending on the describer, the thing described does not. He accuses the antiessentialist of having confused the order of being with the order of knowing [...]¹⁴⁴

Accusing the anti-essentialist of committing the epistemic fallacy, the “essentialist” (a term that Rorty regards as being synonymous with “realist”) opposes the attempt to do

¹⁴⁴ Rorty, “Inquiry as Recontextualisation: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 93-110, p. 100.

away with the notion of an independent objective reality. Rorty responds by stating that his anti-representationalism does not deny the existence of a reality that is independent of our descriptions. It simply denies that our descriptions are meant to represent that reality. Rorty's and the early Nietzsche's anti-realisms are united by a refusal to believe that we can know a self-consistent independent reality while it is being, as Rorty says, "reflected in all those mirrors".¹⁴⁵ What I have been arguing, on the contrary, is that belief in our ability to represent a reality that has an intrinsic nature does not entail the need for a single or essential form of representation to capture its nature. In the first chapter I argued that we can represent the same objective reality using different anatomical principles - a fact that is exemplified by science's stratification of reality into objects that range from the sub-atomic to the astronomic. In this chapter I have argued that the use of metaphors gives further scope for representing the same reality in different ways. Metaphors may, on the face of it, "insinuate wrong ideas" and "confuse the conceptual categories" by analogizing things that are not identical but this does not mean that they are unrealistic. It is by virtue of whatever degree of likeness a good metaphor has that it provides a truthful representation of its subject, often encouraging us to see that subject in new and enlightening ways.

By adopting this kind of non-reductive realism we can agree with Rorty that the Mirror of Nature (in his absolutist and reductionist sense) is a myth whilst avoiding the less plausible aspects of his anti-realist alternative. Instead of denying that our language represents reality altogether we can accept the contingency that Rorty insists goes into forming our descriptions and maintain that this does not rule

¹⁴⁵ Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualisation: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 93-110, p. 100.

out our realism. For example, we can take his metaphor of “the tool” to be a useful one (among others) when thinking of language and accept that our descriptions cut the world up in lots of useful ways while also denying that this rules out our realism. Instead of rejecting the notion that “truth is correspondence to reality” because we have given up on the idea that “some one among the languages mankind has used to deal with the universe is the one the universe prefers – the one which cuts things at *the joints*” we can save the notion by denying that realism demands only one “essential” conception.¹⁴⁶ We can accept that our linguistic descriptions are able to represent the world in various ways while still maintaining that those ways are realistic. By relinquishing the idea that there must be a single privileged way of representing reality we can embrace the realism of the ways that we do represent reality. With Donald Davidson we can save the notion of objective truth by denying that it stands for an inscrutable absolute outside of our “schemes and science”.

Returning to Kuhn’s non-teleological reading of intellectual history, this kind of realism can also help us to make sense of the notion of scientific progress albeit as an imperfect and inefficient kind of progress. We can accept that science advances by improving the accuracy with which our words “attach to nature” (to use a phrase of Kuhn’s) without supposing that we are guided in advance by a perfect “paradigm” that does not need periodic revision. This is what I take to be the moral of Kuhn’s argument in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In discussing how it is that science can be thought to progress through paradigm shifts Kuhn describes science as “a process whose successive stages are characterised by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature” but also as one in which “even the most striking past

¹⁴⁶ Rorty, “Texts and Lumps” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 78-92, pp. 79-80. My emphasis.

success provides no guarantee that crisis can be indefinitely postponed.”¹⁴⁷ Kuhn presents the history of science as a succession of imperfect representations of nature that have each provided us with an improved understanding despite their subsequent crises and revisions. He describes scientific inquiry as an inefficient exploratory practice that lacks a “plan that had been present at the start” but nevertheless makes progress as new paradigms “usually preserve a great deal of the most concrete parts of past achievement.”¹⁴⁸ It is a practice in which our understanding can be so imperfect and can change so much that “though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world.”¹⁴⁹ This is not the kind of radical change in “conceptual scheme” that Davidson and Rorty interpret Kuhn as describing but it is change that sometimes radically alters our conception of reality. Science is a practice in which our dependence on representations can result in this kind of fallibility and change while it nevertheless continues to improve our grasp on reality.

When Rorty discusses science he often applies his analogy of “the tool” in order to encourage us not to think of it as a representation. He urges us to value science for its practical usefulness rather than any “mirror-like” representational properties. The virtue of using the analogy of “the tool” when thinking about science and language is that it moves us away from the kind of “metaphysical, reductionist” conception of description that Rorty does so much to discredit. It allows us to distance ourselves from the need to find that one perfect and metaphysically essential way of describing reality that Rorty believes realists hanker for. The problem with

¹⁴⁷ The first quote in this sentence is from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 170. The second quote is from page 121.

¹⁴⁸ The first quote in this sentence is from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 172. The second quote is from page 169.

¹⁴⁹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 121.

Rorty's approach is that he denies that this tool has to accurately "fit" the reality that it is designed to work on. This denial is not necessary so long as we avoid becoming fixated by "metaphysical, reductionist needs" as if we are bound to exclusively identify reality with the particular description that we apply to it at any one time. Often the task at hand determines the instrument used. As Rorty says:

The line between a giraffe and the surrounding air is clear enough if you are a human being interested in hunting for meat. If you are a language-using ant or amoeba, or a space voyager observing us from far above, that line is not so clear, and it is not clear that you would need or have a word for "giraffe" in your language. More generally, it is not clear that any of the millions of ways of describing the piece of space-time occupied by what we call a giraffe is any closer to the way things are in themselves than any of the others.

Rorty here rightly insists that we describe things as we do because of our needs and interests. Where he is wrong is in supposing that because no single description is "closer to the way things are in themselves than any of the others" we must deny the realism of those descriptions. Once you give up on the idea that there must be one single and exclusive form of description that captures the way things are the relativity of descriptions to purposes or perspectives no longer rules out their realism. Even apparently unrealistic representations – like metaphors - can have a degree of realism.

Having explored Rorty's theory of metaphor I would now like to turn to Rorty's account of personal identity in order to show how his anti-realist theory of

metaphor is employed in his political philosophy. Rorty describes a practice of “self-creation” in which individuals achieve autonomy through the creation of new metaphors for their identity. In order to explore the plausibility of this account of personhood I will offer an interpretation of the poetry of Sylvia Plath as an example of self-creation. I will also look at the implications of Rorty’s claim that the idea of a common human nature must be abandoned. Rorty places great emphasis on the role of the poet when it comes to generating our sense of solidarity. To examine this approach I will look at the work of Tony Harrison.

Chapter 4 - The Poeticised Republic

Strong Poets

So far I have been primarily concerned with Rorty's views on the nature of knowledge and his attempt to make a radical departure from "the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation". We have seen that Rorty's desire for such a departure springs from his limited reading of the possibilities within realism. I have argued against Rorty's characterisation of realism and in favour of an approach that admits the contingencies that accompany the practice of representation. I agree with Rorty that we must abandon the Platonism that demands a single, perfect and exclusive view of reality and I agree that we must resist scepticism towards forms of description that do not meet that imagined ideal. Neither requirement however imposes upon us the need to abandon representationalism and realism. A less metaphysical, less reductionist realism provides an accurate account of the way that we (including scientists) successfully represent reality albeit in contingent, various and imperfect ways. Rorty's anti-realist stance is to a large extent motivated by a laudable wish to disabuse philosophers of the belief that they are able to see further out of the cave than everyone else. However, he is wrong to insist that this requires us to abandon realism. According to the set of Platonic oppositions that inform Rorty's thought a representation that is contingent cannot be realistic and so the idea of representing an objective reality that has an intrinsic nature is ruled out so long as we do it in

contingent ways. I have argued, on the contrary, that the contingency of a representation need not rule out its realism once we fulfil Rorty's stated intention once and for all and discard the philosophical dogmas that create such oppositions.

Having got to this point I would like to change focus slightly. Rorty is as much a political philosopher as he is an (anti)epistemologist and he places great faith in the utopian potential of his anti-realist approach. In this chapter I would like to continue my assessment of Rorty's anti-realism while examining its influence on his political philosophy. As we have seen, Rorty's utopia would be a "poeticised culture".¹⁵⁰ It would be a culture that has realised that "metaphoric redescrptions are the mark of genius and revolutionary leaps forward."¹⁵¹ This culture would have abandoned the need to find one privileged, literal way of describing the world and thereby have embraced the role that metaphors play in our language. It would have woken up to the impossibility of reducing our language so that it corresponds to *the* way the world is and recognized our potential for describing the world in endlessly new and creative ways. Rorty places great emphasis on that potential to the extent that he regards the truth to be extremely "mobile". For him, our inability to isolate a description that exclusively captures the way things are makes truth merely "the fossilized product of some past act of imagination."¹⁵² For Rorty, metaphors are not insightful ways of representing reality that rely for their success on a correspondence to reality. They are inventive uses of language that have no realist truth content. There is no truth in this sense as far as Rorty is concerned. The ways in which we describe the world are entirely contingent on the acts of imagination of the poets who first produced them.

¹⁵⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 65.

¹⁵¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 28.

¹⁵² Rorty, "Unger, Castoriadis, and the Romance of a National Future", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 177-192 (p. 186).

Rorty envisages a utopia in which the hierarchy of Plato's Republic is turned on its head and the creative artist takes the place of the philosopher as the most important cultural figure.

Rorty states that a poet is best able to appreciate our potential for re-describing the world because they are "the person who uses words as they have never been used".¹⁵³ By this strength they can break out of "one perspective, into another".¹⁵⁴ They accept the contingency of our descriptions and are open to new and surprising metaphors whereas the philosopher misguidedly tries to entrench one particular description as if it captured *the* reality of things. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty states that the Romantic poets serve as the best historical example of the kind of figure that he has in mind because they regarded creative art as the primary tool of moral and intellectual reform. For example, by setting out to describe the lives of uneducated country folk in their poetry Wordsworth and Coleridge sought to elevate them in the minds of the reading public.¹⁵⁵ The Romantics believed that our social and intellectual attitudes could be changed through the creative re-description of the world. They confirm for Rorty that the truth is made rather than found and show that language is a tool for "grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations."¹⁵⁶ Rorty emphasises the way that our descriptions of the world are coloured by our values and claims that this gives us the power to transform the world. The imposition of our values makes the un-mirror-like nature of our descriptions most obvious. So long as our relationship to reality is mediated in this way we cannot attain that perfectly

¹⁵³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁵ Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1963).

¹⁵⁶ Rorty, "Texts and Lumps", in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 78-92, p. 81.

“objective” representation that Rorty regards as being the object of realism and so it is better to deny the representational nature of language and treat it simply as a tool for getting the world that we want.

Rorty argues that our realism is ruled out by our tendency to describe things in ways that are contingent on our interests. Our inability to attain an absolute conception of reality prevents us from corresponding to reality. As a consequence, we must accept that our particular beliefs do not correspond to reality. What we take to be true about ourselves is a reflection of the way that we have come to describe ourselves rather than a representation of reality. The social changes that have occurred over the centuries have occurred because we have periodically re-created ourselves in line with our historically contingent values and not because we have increased our objectivity. When Wordsworth and Coleridge set out to re-describe the lives of poor rural people they were performing such a re-creation. They were not describing reality but using their imaginative creativity to change what those people “are”. Rorty claims that it is this potential to re-describe ourselves that fuels social change rather than any increase in our objectivity. This gives the poet a leading cultural significance in Rorty’s political philosophy and prompts him to claim that his anti-realist philosophy is most suited to a hopeful utopian liberal politics.

There are no objective grounds on which to base our self-descriptions in Rorty’s poeticised culture. Our “nature” changes as our beliefs change and our self-descriptions reflect that contingency. For example, our liberal values do not reflect the fact that we *really* each have an intrinsic equality or autonomy. Rorty denies that autonomy is “something which all human beings have within them and which society

can release by ceasing to repress them.”¹⁵⁷ He is suspicious of any attempt to justify a set of beliefs by appealing to an intrinsic reality. The fact that throughout the centuries we have described ourselves in ways that have suited different beliefs and values is an indication that we cannot isolate an essential (and therefore on his terms a “real”) nature for ourselves. Rorty urges us to approach our self-descriptions with the same sense of irony that he urges us to adopt in our dealings with the non-human and so he denies that his own commitment to liberal democracy is founded on a conception of human nature that is objective. It merely signifies his membership of a culture that has come to describe people as equal and autonomous. In fact, Rorty’s ironic attitude leads him to challenge that description as when he states that autonomy is only “something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which few actually do.” Rorty cannot seek to justify his own politics by appealing to an intrinsic reality. As far as he is concerned, it is up to the poet to transform the world into something that matches a particular set of values while ironist philosophers remind us of their lack of objectivity.

In Rorty’s culture only intellectuals would worry about the contingency of our beliefs. Non-intellectuals would not worry. Rorty’s culture would not be one that “socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization”.¹⁵⁸ Doing so would risk engendering resentment towards the status quo. Instead, it is up to poets to question those contingencies in the privacy of their own idiom.¹⁵⁹ They are the ones who challenge convention by using

¹⁵⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 87.

¹⁵⁹ Honi Fern Haber has criticised Rorty for the elitism that is implicit in his distinction between the intellectual and the non-intellectual. Rorty deprives the non-intellectual of the opportunity to criticise the status quo and to give voice to their possible dissatisfaction. I return to this problem in my discussion of Tony Harrison’s poetry. See Honi Fern Haber *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard*,

words as they have never been used. This is how Rorty defines autonomy in his liberal culture. It is a state that is reached by certain individuals who privately react against convention. In this regard, the non-conformism that characterizes Rorty's account of intellectual innovation also characterises his account of the poet's life so that the use of a "*literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for that purpose, will necessarily fail."¹⁶⁰ There is also no "real self" for the poet to discover. On Rorty's terms, the belief in a real self is a sign of bad faith. It expresses a desire for a human "essence" that transcends our necessary contingency. Rorty insists that the project of gaining autonomy requires the formation of novel descriptions or "metaphors" that create new people for us to be.

Rorty accepts our physical existence and its "brute, inhuman, causal stubbornness" but he insists that "this should not be confused with... an *intentional* stubbornness, an insistence on being *described in a certain way*, its *own way*."¹⁶¹ As far as individual people are concerned, Rorty denies that there is a "right" way to describe someone and he claims that each person's identity is effectively produced in the act of description. The fact that those descriptions do not represent reality gives us free rein to be creative:

This is the difference between the will to truth and the will to self-overcoming. It is the difference between thinking of redemption as making contact with something larger and more enduring than oneself and redemption as Nietzsche describes it: "recreating all 'it was' into a 'thus I

Rorty, *Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 52-56.

¹⁶⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 28.

¹⁶¹ Rorty, "Texts and Lumps", in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 78-92 (p. 83).

willed it.”¹⁶²

Rorty takes inspiration from Alexander Nehamas’s aestheticist reading of Nietzsche in *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* in order to challenge the notion that we have a pre-given identity that we are beholden to.¹⁶³ Nehamas emphasises Nietzsche’s denial of the existence of a reality that underlies appearances in order to present the self as something akin to a fictional story that we create as we live. According to this interpretation, Nietzsche’s philosophy of becoming undermines the idea that knowing oneself is a matter of discovery. The self is not already formed for us to discover but is created by us. Similarly, self-creation, for Rorty, is not a process of “coming to know a truth which was out there (or in here) all the time”.¹⁶⁴ Some may use a script and a language that their culture has prepared in advance but for the poet it is an act of originality and creativity for which they use “words never used before”.¹⁶⁵

Since, according to Rorty, a literal description of a person’s individuality will fail to capture the novel character of the contingencies that shape them, the self-creating poet must create new forms of language that challenge what we take to be meaningful. In his paper “Feminism and Pragmatism” Rorty states that a kind of separatism is required to prevent the dissolution of such a project so that “a language [can be] gradually put together... in the course of a long series of flirtations with meaninglessness”:

¹⁶² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 29.

¹⁶³ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press, 1985). Brian Leiter has challenged Nehamas’ interpretation of Nietzsche in his “The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche”. See *Nietzsche*, edited by John Richardson and Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 281-321.

¹⁶⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 27.

¹⁶⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 28.

“For meaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices – unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one”.¹⁶⁶

In the same way that intellectual revolutions occur when eccentric geniuses utter words that do not mean anything so, according to Rorty, social changes occur when particular people start to be described in novel and incomprehensible ways. As we saw in regard to his theory of intellectual innovation Rorty defines “meaningfulness” along narrow lines. In order to respond to contingency, or to be original, Rorty claims that it is necessary to defy the conventional conditions of meaningfulness. We are not in a position to capture new contingencies with our existing cognitive scheme. In the case of the ironist poet, being novel requires the individual to defy what is considered meaningful when describing him- or herself:

The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one’s contingency [...] is identical with the process of inventing a new language – that is, of thinking up some new metaphors.¹⁶⁷

Rorty appeals to his theory of metaphor in order to describe the practice of gaining autonomy as a creative practice that demands separatism and radical alterity. Novel poets are so different from other people that they fail to make sense to them. In the absence of a common cognitive scheme each autonomous individual is identified by their own idiosyncratic and untranslatable metaphors.

¹⁶⁶ Rorty, “Feminism and Pragmatism”, in *Truth and Progress*, Philosophical Papers, Volume 3 (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 202-227, p. 217.

¹⁶⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 27.

Rorty believes that his philosophy is suited to a pluralistic liberal politics because it avoids the suggestion that one of our self-descriptions has the privilege of representing the essential truth about us. It encourages freedom and tolerance by denying that any particular description of us is *the* right one. Yet, Rorty claims that in order to achieve this freedom and tolerance we must do away with the idea that we share a common conceptual landscape. On his terms, having common concepts would commit their possessors to confinement within a set of conventionalist and essentialist limits that dictate what it is possible for them to say. Rorty defines these limits by suggesting that they rule out novelty and contingency. He claims that our “metaphoric redescrptions” are too confusing to our existing notions of what makes sense. Although Rorty pays lip service to Davidson claim that there are no such things as “conceptual schemes” Rorty’s conception of the non-cognitive nature of intellectual innovation belies that service. He argues that new “metaphors” cannot be understood using our existing conceptual scheme and so we lack the commonality to our cognition that could afford common understanding. For Rorty, such commonality would require an essential, privileged and exclusive metaphysical standpoint that transcends the diversity, novelty and contingency of our lives. In the absence of such a standpoint we lack the kind of common concepts that would allow us to comprehend each other. Rorty posits precisely the kind of conceptual relativism that Davidson rejects and presents a picture in which different people and cultures inhabit different “conceptual schemes”.

Rorty envisages a form of liberalism that Jean-François Lyotard has questioned because it imagines each person or culture operating a kind of authority

“whose rationale is not in principle accessible to everybody”.¹⁶⁸ By giving up on the possibility of understanding each other we create a kind of terror. Rorty states that people can only *rationally* accept or understand new ideas by holding most of their old ideas constant. They have to be able to invoke some of their old ideas in the course of understanding the new ones. If they have to make a more radical break in the continuity of their cognition they cannot do so “rationally”. They have to say, helplessly “it just happened; somehow I got converted.”¹⁶⁹ In the absence of continuity between the ideas of different people and cultures they can only seem like alien forces to each other. In response to this problem Rorty falls back on Davidson. He argues that Lyotard would be justified in his claims if it were true that we encounter other people and cultures “without pretending to establish any continuity between [our modes] of discourse”.

“If they did not, as Donald Davidson has remarked, it is hard to see how the two would ever have been able to learn enough of each other’s languages to recognize the other as a language user”.¹⁷⁰

Despite offering an un-Davidsonian account of language in order to reject the idea that we have the kind of commonality to our cognition that can afford common understanding Rorty invokes such commonality in order to play down the consequences of the former claim. Although Rorty offers an account of conceptual

¹⁶⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, “Histoire Universelle et Différences Culturelles,” *Critique* 41 (May 1985), p. 559. This is Rorty’s translation from his “Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 211-222, p. 214.

¹⁶⁹ Rorty, “Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 211-222, p. 212.

¹⁷⁰ This and the preceding quote is from Rorty’s “Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 211-222, p. 215. Rorty quotes Jean-François Lyotard, “Histoire Universelle et Différences Culturelles,” p. 566.

and cultural relativism that posits precisely the kind of barriers to comprehension that Davidson refuses to entertain – by suggesting, for example, that women are forced to “flirt with meaninglessness” when challenging sexism – he nevertheless shrugs off concerns by stating that differences between cultures, beliefs and discourses are not differences in “conceptual scheme” but merely “differences of opinion”.¹⁷¹

Rorty’s support for Davidson’s rejection of the idea of a “conceptual scheme” is equivocal. Rorty admires Davidson’s lack of interest in the notion of a true metaphysical reality beyond our cognition yet he is reluctant to accept the idea that we share a common cognitive landscape. He supports Davidson’s attempt to relieve us of the need to distinguish our man-made language from the reality that it is thought to represent but he does not take this as licence to accept that our language describes a common, objective world. Such commonality does not capture the sense of historical and cultural contingency that Rorty takes from Kuhn. The idea that we have a common cognitive scheme does not seem to capture the kind of change and discontinuity that Kuhn describes taking place during intellectual revolutions:

[...] though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world.¹⁷²

Some form of conceptual relativism seems necessary in order to capture the cognitive gestalt switch that is necessary to move from one world to the other. The incommensurable nature of the two worlds seems to require incommensurable “conceptual schemes”. This is why Rorty claims that sentences describing a new

¹⁷¹ Rorty, “Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 211-222, p. 218.

¹⁷² Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 121.

world are meaningless to someone working in the old world. The difference between the old and the new worlds that the revolutionary thinker switches between is so momentous that there seems to be nothing to stop our concepts from changing beyond recognition.

As far as Rorty is concerned, positing a degree of commonality to our cognition gives the realist philosopher something to get their teeth into. It suggests that there is a common objective reality informing our linguistic practices that belies historical and cultural change and not a “mobile army of metaphors” that transform appearances like a kaleidoscope. It seems to give encouragement to the “Platonic quest” to find some essential meaning to our concepts that stands apart from the vagaries of their use. Rorty is resistant to the idea because that quest has traditionally aimed at transcending contingency. It has aimed at penetrating behind our representations to what “we are *really* talking about”. In challenging our “metaphysical” urge Rorty argues that the mechanism of metaphor makes it hard to maintain a sense of what we are really talking about. He claims that when people say unusual things they confuse our concepts so much that it becomes hard to know *what* they are talking about. We continually alter our conception of the world to the point that we fail to understand each other. In the last chapter I tried to offer reasons to doubt this. I argued that metaphors change and supplement our concepts in comprehensible ways based on the sense that we *can* make of them. They do not alter our concepts beyond recognition but allow us to appreciate new conceptions of the world by means of such recognition. That is not to say that our notions of what is to be believed do not change. The question of whether something is to be believed is different from the question of whether it can be understood. Rorty often seems to

confuse the two as if what we currently believe is all that we can understand. This seems to be down to his insistence that all a thinker has to work with is an “inherited language-game” so that a sentence that diverges from conventional wisdom is by nature inherently meaningless. He fails to credit us with the ability to entertain new and diverse descriptions of the world using a common language.

The idea that our language provides a basis for common understanding among people with diverse lives implies that it does not limit us in the way that Rorty supposes. It implies that our notion of what can count as meaningful extends beyond conventional wisdom. For Rorty, as we have seen, our language *is* restricted in precisely this way. He argues we are only able to understand controversial or unusual ideas by changing our notions of what counts as meaningful. Rather than propose alternative descriptions of the world using common concepts Rorty claims that it is necessary to invent new and untranslatable ones for the purpose. As a result, people who hold different beliefs and who employ different descriptions of the world have no common means of communicating those beliefs and descriptions. On Rorty’s terms, people who hold particular beliefs do not just disagree with other claims but are unable to understand them. He concedes that it is possible to learn these new languages so that they become part of a more inclusive culture but he maintains that they cannot be reconciled in a way that allows us to treat them as descriptions of the same reality. Instead we must posit a plurality of separate and irreconcilable worlds and cultures that have no need or ability to enter into “rational” communication with one another. In the absence of a common scheme for conceptualising the world we are unable to establish the terms on which such communication could take place.

One might wonder where this leaves Rorty’s own liberal worldview. We tend

to think of liberalism as an attempt to promote a conception of justice that is based on the idea that we share a common humanity. This must become difficult once you have abandoned the kind of common scheme for conceptualizing the world that such an idea would require. Rorty argues that, in order to solve this problem within his liberal utopia, it is necessary to separate the private realm of self-creation from the public realm of moral obligation. In the next part of this chapter I would like to explore the plausibility of this separation. I will do this by interpreting the work of Sylvia Plath as an example of the kind of creative process that Rorty has in mind when he describes the act of self-creation.

Sylvia Path

Sylvia Plath's poetic persona is renowned for expressing dissatisfaction with her contingencies. Her suicide has often promoted critics to interpret her poetry as expressing, to use David Holbrook's words "a dangerous rejection of life moving towards nihilism and an abandonment to hate."¹⁷³ Rorty himself diagnoses nihilism and hate – on the level of the private project of gaining autonomy – as expressions of a loss of aspiration due to our inability to emancipate a pure form of the self from "messy" contingency.¹⁷⁴ For Rorty, this is a hangover from our tradition's attempts to distil the self down until it corresponds to an independently autonomous centre, free from the marks of our particular place in the world. For Holbrook, Plath's poetry was an expression of her lack of satisfaction with the obligations of her inherited femininity. According to him, this manifested itself in her impulse towards gaining

¹⁷³ David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: The Athlone Press, 1991), p. 1.

¹⁷⁴ Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 66-82 (pp. 72-82)

purity and towards destroying her contingencies. It might seem unfair to align Rorty's attack on philosophical nihilism with Holbrook's reactionary attack on Plath's rejection of her inherited femininity. The difference between them is that whereas Holbrook would have preferred it if Plath had not lost faith in her inherited role, Rorty would have understood her doubts and would have deterred her from rejecting her contingencies by urging her to try and create a self that she did not have doubts about.

I want to claim that we can interpret Plath's poetry not as a nihilistic rejection of life. I want to identify in her poetry an attempt at self-creation. In describing this actual struggle for self-creation I want to assess the viability of Rorty's account of such a process. Doubts about the viability of Rorty's account crop up in his essay "Freud and Moral Reflection". In this essay Rorty describes the unconscious as a partner in conversation:

"What is novel in Freud's view of the unconscious is his claim that our unconscious selves are not dumb, sullen, lurching brutes, but rather the intellectual peers of our conscious selves, possible conversational partners for those selves."¹⁷⁵

We have seen how Rorty refuses to give the network of beliefs and desires that comprise the self over to a source of intentionality that is outside of those beliefs and desires. Following Donald Davidson's essay "Paradoxes of Irrationality"¹⁷⁶, Rorty

¹⁷⁵ Rorty, "Freud and moral reflection", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 143-163 (p. 149).

¹⁷⁶ In *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, ed. B. Wollheim and J. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

says that there is no need to regard the self as anything more than a number of sets of beliefs and desires, each one a consistent package (a “quasi-self”¹⁷⁷). He says that it is unnecessary to treat the unconscious as “a seething mass of inarticulate instinctual energies, a ‘reservoir of libido’ to which consistency is irrelevant.”¹⁷⁸ Rorty seeks to show that such descriptions – which create a permanently disruptive gap in the coherence of our identity – can be jettisoned. He says that Freud helped us to see that the unconscious “can be viewed as an alternative set [of beliefs and desires] inconsistent with the familiar set that we identify with consciousness, yet sufficiently coherent internally to count as a person.”¹⁷⁹

The reason we tend to describe the unconscious as a “mob of ‘irrational’ brutes”¹⁸⁰ that our intellect has to struggle with – rather than as an alternative intellect – is that “one’s unconscious beliefs are not *reasons* for a change in one’s conscious beliefs, but they may *cause* changes in the latter beliefs, just as may portions of one’s body (e.g., the retina, the fingertips, the pituitary gland, the gonads)”¹⁸¹. On this view, the unconscious has a causal stubbornness that is akin to that of metaphors. Just as metaphors become incorporated in our conscious beliefs and desires, our unconscious can become incorporated in an enlarged version of our conscious beliefs and desires. Trying to conceptualise this model of self-enlargement, Rorty writes:

Once I could not figure out why I was acting so oddly, [...] But now I shall be able to see my actions as rational, as making sense, though

¹⁷⁷ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 143-163 (p. 147).

¹⁷⁸ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 149.

¹⁷⁹ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 147.

¹⁸⁰ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 149.

¹⁸¹ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 147.

perhaps based on mistaken premises. I may even discover that those premises were not mistaken, that my unconscious knew better than I did.¹⁸²

Trying to explain why the “crazy quasi people” in you hold “the crazy views they do”¹⁸³ makes it possible to re-appropriate your unconscious as a step towards becoming a self that you can call your own. This is not a “true self” but it can be a self that has woven itself into a coherent configuration.

Doubts about the viability of this model are encapsulated by Rorty himself when he says: “this way of stating the aim of psychoanalytic treatment may seem to make everything sound too sweetly reasonable.”¹⁸⁴ He also acknowledges that “the facts of resistance forbid the analyst to think in conversational terms.”¹⁸⁵ On Rorty’s model, I think that this difficulty must be interpreted as stemming from the possible incompatibility of some of the sets of beliefs and desires that might comprise a self. It is understandable that someone might resist and deny a belief or a desire that could cause them guilt and humiliation. In this instance, a hostile relationship between selves would seem more likely than a conversational one. Perhaps it might even involve a relationship to the unconscious that kept it unarticulated and more manifestly causal, rather than reasonable and conversational. It is here, I think, that we can get a picture of the kind of strength that Rorty’s poet might need in order to listen to those selves and re-create them so she can say “thus I willed it”.

¹⁸² Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 150.

¹⁸³ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 150.

¹⁸⁴ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 150 (n.11).

¹⁸⁵ Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p 151 (n.11).

Sylvia Plath's own poetry is notable for the explicit way that she lays herself bare in it. Although, having said that, articulating her unconscious is shown by her to be very difficult. Her unconscious usually turns up in less articulated, more causal and menacing incarnations. Consider Plath's poem "The Disquieting Muses"¹⁸⁶ in which the sense of alienation that Holbrook identifies is expressed in a split between the homely self and a more seductive and also illicit and disquieting self:

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.¹⁸⁷

What is most notable here is that these muses are "mouthless, eyeless and bald." They embody the contingencies that make Plath the alienated individual she is but they are not in conversation with her. I do not think that Rorty would subscribe wholeheartedly to Freud's notion of the "return of the repressed" because it immediately assumes an antagonistic and estranged relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. But Rorty does concede that unconscious beliefs and desires – that can be potentially incorporated in our consciousness beliefs and desires

¹⁸⁶ In Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 74-75.

¹⁸⁷ Plath, "The Disquieting Muses", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 74-76, lines 9-16.

– can have an unarticulated stubbornness as causes of changes in conscious beliefs and desires. Even though, according to Rorty, such causal stubbornness can always be re-described it can still throw up beliefs and desires that generate anxiety. They can do so if they contradict and even displace conscious beliefs and desires.

Holbrook talks of “ego-weakness” in this way.¹⁸⁸ He says that it is a state of consciousness in which the stability of the ego is continually threatened by the libidinal ego – a collection of unsatisfied desires that are so unsuccessfully repressed that the ego cannot ignore them and which are often felt in highly emotional ways – for example through frustration and anger. The ego has to re-assert itself by resisting them. According to Jacqueline Rose, when Holbrook uses this model to criticise Plath he projects onto her a “degraded and abused image of femininity”.¹⁸⁹ This is an image of “a woman who despises herself as a woman”.¹⁹⁰ According to Holbrook, Plath’s libido opens up a gap in her identity and causes hatred, “extremism, violence, gross indecency and moral inversion”.¹⁹¹ To reiterate my departure from Holbrook, I do not want to attack Plath. I want to use Plath’s work as an example of an attempt to self-create, not as an example of self-defeating hatred.

In Rorty’s terms, rather than having a disruptive gap in her identity, Plath’s identity comprised two quasi-selves in a stand-off, both trying to assert themselves in incompatible ways. It is the strong poet’s task is to listen to those selves and re-create them so she can say “thus I willed it”:

¹⁸⁸ Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁸⁹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago Press, 1991), p. 18.

¹⁹⁰ Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 19.

¹⁹¹ Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, p. 20.

“the patient has to think dialectically, to grant that there is much to be said on both sides. To think, as opposed to react to a new stimulus, simply *is* to compare and contrast candidates for admission into one’s set of beliefs and desires”.¹⁹²

According to Rorty, to think about the unconscious is to articulate it. Once you do, you can reconcile yourself to it by describing it in terms that you are comfortable with, or you can disconnect its effect on you by describing it as insignificant (assuming, of course, that re-description has the power to do so). This is an example of the struggle that we have seen in Rorty’s work to assert the autonomy of our beliefs over their pre-determination. Here, in this struggle for an autonomous self, is an example of “grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations”, rather than resisting the grip that they have on us.¹⁹³ It is an autonomous act in which the agent takes responsibility for themselves through creative self-expression and forms a space in which they can endorse new modes of being for themselves. But to do this, such a re-interpretation will still have to be thought to apply truthfully to the idiosyncratic causal forces that you are trying to get hold of. Otherwise, presumably, those causal forces will go on asserting themselves as before. As we shall see, reconciling her various selves proves very difficult for Plath’s poetic persona.

According to Holbrook, when stuck with the mouthless character of her unconscious, Plath expresses “desperation at not knowing what she is, and her

¹⁹² Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 143-163 (p.151 (n.11)).

¹⁹³ Rorty, “Texts and Lumps”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 78-92 (p. 81).

uncertainty about taking on any form, finding any direction, or creating anything from her body that was substantial and trustworthy.”¹⁹⁴

“The inner edifice has to be made out of intellectual effort, by a ‘thinking’ version of that impingement ‘which is experienced as hate’ – which is why it is dark. It is a shadow self [...]”¹⁹⁵

However, what Holbrook identifies as a “shadow self” that is experienced as hate, is also potentially a space for self-creation. In “Poem for a Birthday” Plath’s shadow self is eerie. But rather than being dark because it is eerie, it is eerie because it is dark. It is not necessarily experienced as hate because it is potentially light:

It has so many cellars,
Such eelish delvings!
I am round as an owl,
I see by my own light.
[...]
I must make more maps.¹⁹⁶

The problem is that Plath cannot create a self that she is reconciled to through her inherited femininity. Plath’s sense of alienation makes her suspicious of that role, as

¹⁹⁴ Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, p. 41.

¹⁹⁵ Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁶ Plath, “Poem for a Birthday”, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 131-137, lines 41-47.

we see in her poem “Mirror”:

[...] A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles and the moon.¹⁹⁷

Plath is suspicious of this role even though that part of her identity includes things that are important to her. In “Child” for example, she expresses her devotion to her baby boy:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new¹⁹⁸

But in being a mother she resists rather than reconciles herself to her need to create a self that she can call her own. In “Mirror” Plath is seen to rely on inherited, lying self-images and there is nothing in that image that she can call herself. In “Morning Song” she dissolves completely as she gives herself over to satisfying her child’s needs:

[...] New statue.

¹⁹⁷ Plath, “Mirror”, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 173-174, lines 10-12.

¹⁹⁸ Plath, “Child”, in *Collected Poems*, p. 265, lines 1-3.

In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.¹⁹⁹

In “Ariel” her alienated self re-asserts itself in competition with her children:

The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the dive

Into the red²⁰⁰

In these poems we can see the conflict that Rorty identifies between private projects of self-creation and the needs of others. Those who do not feel the need to assert a sense of alienation would probably be able to see the insignificance of those feelings when compared to their love and affection for their children. However, in Plath’s poetry, that sense of alienation is strong enough to persist. It is strong enough to persist but not strong enough to overcome resistance. The difficulty in reconciling herself to her sense of alienation is expressed in “Stillborn” where she uses the idea of stillborn children as a metaphor for her poems. In this poem, her preoccupation with

¹⁹⁹ Plath, “Morning Song”, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 156-157, lines 4-6.

²⁰⁰ Plath, “Ariel”, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 239-240, lines 24-29.

her alienated self is seen as a guilt ridden fantasy about the possible consequences of neglecting her real children:

[...] they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.²⁰¹

This is not just expressive of a lack of confidence in her poetic project; it is an uncanny metaphor for the consequences of this internal conflict between her two significant selves. The role of mother remains unfulfilled, thanks to a clash between that role and the project of articulating her alienation from that role. The project of expressing that alienated individuality remains unfulfilled because that project neglects those who depend on her. Not only does she find it difficult to articulate her alienated self but the articulation of that self is resisted by her inherited role. Self-creation through the resolution of this conflict is not a realisable possibility for Plath. The relationship between selves is not one between conversational partners, but rather inheres between two struggling selves, each of whom needs to overcome the other. Neither of those selves can be described as insignificant enough to justify that overcoming.

Instead of turning to herself and saying “Thus I willed it”, Plath elsewhere expresses a need not to re-appropriate her past but to break from it completely. However, these forms of self-creation are superficial. In “Face Lift”, the poet fantasises about cosmetic self-creation:

²⁰¹ Plath, “Stillborn”, in *Collected Poems*, p. 142, lines 14-15.

Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper.²⁰²

"In Plaster" shows the superficiality of such change as the former self re-asserts itself:

Living with her was like living with my own coffin:

[...]

I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her.

And she'll perish with emptiness then [...]²⁰³

Achieving self-creation in this cosmetic way is not possible for Plath. She cannot overcome that "messy" side that re-asserts itself and which overcomes the untainted self.²⁰⁴ This is mainly because the untainted self is passive – it has a "slave mentality."²⁰⁵ In "Fever 103", the contrast between "messy" contingency and purity is transferred onto a contrast between the sinful and the virginal. There is a choice between going to hell and suffering sin that cannot be purged, or "dissolving .../ To Paradise".²⁰⁶ The virginal state is the purest and it does not give itself over to the needs of others but it withdraws from life:

²⁰² Plath, "Face Lift", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 155-156, line 20.

²⁰³ Plath, "In Plaster", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 159-160, lines 48 + 55-56.

²⁰⁴ Plath, "In Plaster", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 159-160, line 53.

²⁰⁵ Plath, "In Plaster", in *Collected Poems*, p.159-160, line 21.

²⁰⁶ Plath, "Fever 103", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 231-232, line 53-54.

I am too pure for you or anyone.²⁰⁷

Purity and self-effacement, in other words, are the same for Plath. She is aware of the ineffectual, dis-empowering nature of the self that tries to deny messy contingency. But we have seen that even when Plath tries to tackle her contingent quasi-selves she fails to gain the kind of autonomy that Rorty describes; that is, she fails to gain an individual self-image that she can call her own and that she can respect and endorse.

In “Lady Lazarus” Plath expresses a need to overcome the past and overcome the resistance of her mother-self and her virgin-self in order to achieve a self that she can call her own:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.²⁰⁸

This is a positive ending - but it is one that is achieved by fantasising about suicide. David Holbrook interprets her violent fantasies as a manifestation of failure and hate - a consequence of her ego-weakness.²⁰⁹ I noted at the start of my discussion of Plath that David Holbrook saw her life as culminating in an abandonment to nihilism and hate” – the result of her loss of faith in the value of her femininity. He claims that her repeated attempts at suicide and her fantasies of consuming and destroying others are

²⁰⁷ Plath, “Fever 103”, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 231-232, line 43.

²⁰⁸ Plath, “Lady Lazarus”, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 244-247, lines 822-84.

²⁰⁹ See Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, p. 291.

manifestations of “the animus which becomes malevolent because it cannot find in itself the “‘female–element–being’ quality.”²¹⁰ Jaqueline Rose responds by criticising Holbrook for projecting onto Plath “a masculinity untempered by an essentially female modification.”²¹¹ As a result of this projection Holbrook criticises Plath for betraying that part of herself that nurtures and cares rather than destroys. According to Rose, critics like Holbrook are preoccupied with the idea of the source of life becoming the destroyer of life. This idea involves the embodiment of our most precious values (like the conviction that cruelty is the worst thing that we do) becoming the embodiment of a nihilism that threatens those values. As I said earlier, Holbrook sees this loss of faith as leading to “extremism, violence, gross indecency and moral inversion.” According to Holbrook, even Plath’s celebration of her more buoyant, exhilarating and not necessarily hostile fantasises (like “Lady Lazerus”) degrade her femininity. This is because by fantasising about suicide she risked harming her children.²¹² But we have also seen how important Plath’s children were to her when she was not fantasising about suicide and when she was trying to reconcile her private project of self-creation with her devotion to them. The problem for her was that when her obsession with that project conflicted with her devotion to her children she looked (to Holbrook) like the embodiment of the Resenter. The Resenter is one who carries his or her yearning for autonomy – on a private level – over onto a need for the embodiment of that autonomy on a public level. He or she dreams of “total revolution” because the values that society is founded on must be overthrown for autonomy to be possible. But the mother does not refuse - she is not able to divide the private realm from the public realm. As a result her fantasies of

²¹⁰ Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, p. 180.

²¹¹ Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 18.

²¹² See Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, p. 277.

autonomy are considered selfish and dangerous. She is forced to take on the role of Resenter. Rorty's idea that there is a private self that can be defined independently of the public or political realm becomes difficult to justify. I previously said that it might seem unfair to align Rorty's attack on nihilism with Holbrook's attack on Plath. To repeat my distinction: whereas Holbrook would have preferred it if Plath's ego had not been weakened, Rorty would have recognised her doubts as an acknowledgement that she needed a new identity. The problem, for Rorty, is that the creation of this autonomy would have required Plath to regard the needs of others as less significant than he believes them to be. Plath's resentment was not a rejection of those values. She was unable to create an autonomous self because of her devotion to those values. Plath was not able to separate the public and the private.²¹³

Plath's fantasies of purity and empowerment may have been fantasies of "total revolution", in which she defied her devotion to others, but they were fantasies after all. When she places her poetic persona in less fantastical situations her resentment is more contained. For an example, consider 'Lebos' in which her devotion becomes both her identity and the source for her resentment:

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats.

²¹³ See Honi Fern Haber's criticism of Rorty in *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59-563.

O vase of acid,
It is love you are full of. You know who you hate.²¹⁴

This tension between Plath's quasi-selves throws up some serious doubts about Rorty's conception of the role of poetry in its harmony with his politics. In "Kindness" we see compassion and solidarity, in the mind of Plath, twisting into subjugation:

O Kindness, kindness
Sweetly picking up pieces!
My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,
May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.²¹⁵

For Plath, kindness is an anaesthetic. She expresses a resentment that is not dissolved by compassion. This raises a problem with Rorty's conception of the harmonious relationship that is meant to exist between poetry and his politics. It is this problem of resentment and the need to promote solidarity that I would like to turn to next.

Solidarity

As far as Richard Rorty is concerned we have no choice but to accept the provinciality of our concepts and our culture. He insists that the "ritual invocation of the need to

²¹⁴ Plath, "Lesbos", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 227-230, lines 64-72.

²¹⁵ Plath, "Kindness", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 269-270, lines 11-15.

avoid relativism” that he encounters amongst his critics is merely a “habit nurtured by the Enlightenment, and justified by it in terms of an appeal to Reason, conceived of as a transcultural human ability to correspond to reality”. In the absence of that ability Rorty sees no way of arguing for the realism of any belief. To do so would be to pursue that Platonic quest for transcendence that is ruled out by the contingency of our descriptions. Rorty argues that the liberal notion of our common humanity is as contingent as any of the various descriptions of the human condition that have arisen throughout history. Rorty denies that his liberal values make him particularly “enlightened” and subscribes to what he calls a “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism” which he describes in the following way:

[...] it should be seen as an attempt to resolve a small, local, psychological problem. This psychological problem is found only within the souls of bourgeois liberals who have not yet gone postmodern, the ones who are still using the rationalist rhetoric of the Enlightenment to back up their liberal ideas. These liberals hold on to the Enlightenment notion that there is something called a common human nature, a metaphysical substrate in which things called “rights” are embedded, and that this substrate takes moral precedence over all merely “cultural” superstructures.²¹⁶

Rorty pitches his political philosophy in terms of that spurious choice that we have seen him offer between anti-realism and the “Platonic quest” to find a single,

²¹⁶ Rorty, “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 203-210, p. 207.

transcendent and exclusive metaphysical truth. In the absence of such a transcendent metaphysical perspective Rorty claims that we must accept that realism and objectivity are impossible. Consequently, there is no objective truth for the liberal to claim knowledge of when criticizing forms of discrimination. Rorty argues that we create our nature through our discourse and so spreading liberal ideas is not a matter of enlightening people about a reality that belies their current beliefs. People are what they are described to be and exposing them to liberal ideas does not lift a veil of ignorance but simply exposes them to another possible description. Rorty eschews the notion of emancipation.²¹⁷ He does not wish to claim that liberals have a unique insight into the truth so he prefers to value the institutions of political freedom over the “metaphysical” underpinnings that philosophers may posit.

Rorty’s politics amounts to the claim that “if we take care of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves.” Rorty values what he calls “free discussion” above any particular notion of the truth or the good. He claims that we can have a culture in which “the press, the judiciary, the elections, and the universities are free, social mobility is frequent and rapid, literacy is universal, higher education is common, and peace and wealth have made possible the leisure necessary to listen to lots of different people and think about what they say”. This culture can exist without us having a view about “universally shared human ends, human rights, the nature of rationality, the Good for Man, nor anything else”.²¹⁸ Rorty advocates for the citizens of his utopia a freedom of conscience and thought that encourages the kind of plurality of voices and opinions that J. S. Mill advocates in *On Liberty*. The individual is given the autonomy to develop their own private and contingent beliefs

²¹⁷ Rorty, “Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 211-222, p. 213.

²¹⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 84.

free from any public pressure to conform. Mill's intention in promoting individual autonomy is to encourage original insights. Mill values free discussion as a mechanism for uncovering new truths and for revising and improving public opinion. The difference with Rorty's vision is that Rorty does not imbue the truth with the same objective quality that Mill imbues it with. In Rorty's system there is no objectivity that sets truth apart from the vagaries of opinion. In this case the result of "free discussion" is not an increase in objectivity. The truth is whatever consensus arises from a choice of metaphoric. The truth will have to "take care of itself", not because it possesses a unique quality that sets it apart from opinion, but precisely because it lacks any such privilege. Individuals are free to nurture their own private and idiosyncratic beliefs and only with luck – "the sort of luck which makes the difference between genius and eccentricity" – will those beliefs influence public opinion and become accepted.²¹⁹

Rorty states that the justification for our liberal principles is entirely ethnocentric and circular. It is the contingent result of culture and chance and Rorty is explicit about the implications of this:

There is no reason the ironist cannot be a liberal, but she cannot be a "progressive" and "dynamic" liberal in the sense in which liberal metaphysicians sometimes claim to be. For she cannot offer the same sort of social hope as metaphysicians offer. She cannot claim that adopting her redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshaled against you. On her account, that ability is a matter of weapons and luck, not a matter of having truth on

²¹⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 29.

your side, or of having detected the “movement of history”.²²⁰

Rorty denies that his liberal principles are based on knowledge of reality. A political system that does not share those principles could exist with equal justification. Such a system might oppress women or sanction slavery. Without any distinction between objective truths and falsehoods it is not possible to objectively oppose the beliefs used to justify such discrimination. It is not open to the inheritors of the values of the Enlightenment to argue that sexism and racism are based on objective falsehoods. Consequently liberals must rely on “weapons and luck” in order to further their cause and not a “transcultural human ability to correspond to reality”.

Rorty agrees that “there is such a thing as moral progress” and that it involves the “ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation” but he denies that this progress marks “a gradual diminution of the influence of prejudice and superstition.”²²¹ On Rorty’s terms it is not possible to contrast prejudice and superstition with a more objective truth. For him, the fact that there is no essential metaphysical truth prevents us from making that distinction. All of our descriptions are contingent, partial and prejudiced. Consequently:

It is neither irrational nor unintelligent to draw the limits of one’s moral community at a national, or racial, or gender border.²²²

²²⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 91.

²²¹ The first quote in this sentence is from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 192. The second quote is from *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 81.

²²² Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 81.

Being rational and intelligent cannot consist in an attitude of objectivity if such an attitude is impossible. Alarming, Rorty goes so far as to insist that “the force of ‘us’ is, typically, contrastive in the sense that it contrasts with a ‘they’ which is also made up of human beings – the wrong sort of human beings.”²²³ One of the implications of his view is that there are no objective grounds on which to challenge the descriptions (and metaphors) that some may use to refer to “the wrong sort of human beings.” Being able to contrast prejudice with a more objective truth seems crucial in such cases and, as we have seen, Rorty rules out that contrast. Instead, our conscience is tied to some particular cultural contingencies that define our provincial community. This is a lesson that Rorty draws from Freud’s moral psychology:

Freud shows us why we deplore cruelty in some cases and relish it in others. He shows us why our ability to love is restricted to some very particular shapes and sizes and colours of people, things, or ideas. He shows us why our sense of guilt is aroused by certain very specific, and in theory quite minor, events, and not by others which, on any familiar moral theory, would loom much larger.²²⁴

Psychoanalysis challenges the attempt to establish a universal moral order by showing that our values are “far more finely textured, far more custom-tailored to our individual case, than the moral vocabulary which the philosophical tradition offered us.” Rorty argues that moral philosophers such as Kant mistakenly attempt to

²²³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 190.

²²⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 32.

obligate us to humanity as a whole by seeking objective and universal grounds on which to base our values whereas literature, ethnography and journalism educate us more effectively by capturing and re-describing the particular contingencies that define us.

In his book *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* Norman Geras tests Rorty's moral particularism by using the example of rescuer testimonies from the Holocaust.²²⁵ Geras challenges Rorty's claim that the notion of our common humanity is a "weak, unconvincing explanation of a generous action."²²⁶ In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty speculates about the motives of rescuers in the following way:

[...] surely they would usually, if queried, have used more parochial terms to explain why they were taking risks to protect a given Jew – for example, that this particular Jew was a fellow Milanese, or a fellow Jutlander, or a fellow member of the same union or profession, or a fellow bocce player, or a fellow parent of small children [...]²²⁷

Contrary to Rorty's speculation, Geras finds that the overwhelming trend amongst actual testimonies is a "universalist voice". Citing many examples, Geras shows that rescuers tend to see Jewish victims as primarily "part of humankind" or "fellow

²²⁵ Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* (London and New York: Vergo, 1995), 7-46.

²²⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 189-91.

²²⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 189-91.

human beings in need”.²²⁸ They do not emphasise the sorts of parochial considerations that Rorty describes. As Geras points out, Rorty often makes a lot of the fact that human beings share a common susceptibility to pain and humiliation.²²⁹ However, Rorty wishes to avoid the suggestion that this common susceptibility comprises a metaphysical essence that belies our apparent differences. His retreat from moral universalism is part of that avoidance manoeuvre. Rorty argues that our commonality is not a reality that is intrinsic to us. It is something that we have to create and maintain through our discourse. Rorty insists that it is not metaphysics that fuels moral progress but the wish to gradually enlarge our moral community. To this end liberal writers seek to widen that community by enlarging the quantity of people that are allowed to constitute it. This is not a matter of recognising an objective truth but of extending our sympathies. It is a matter of describing people in ways that encourage our imaginative identification with them. We do this by telling sad and sentimental stories rather than reflecting on a common essence.²³⁰ Our similarities with respect to pain and humiliation are as contingent as anything else. They do not point towards a metaphysical essence and so, on Rorty’s terms, their truth is reliant on our choice of language. It is up to the liberal writer to propagate and maintain a language that defines cruelty.²³¹ Without this language cruelty would not exist. Rorty endorses the principle of human sympathy and solidarity but he states that it can only be the result of the accumulated efforts of artists who re-create our world in order to gradually increase the number of different people who qualify for that sympathy and

²²⁸ This and the quote in the preceding sentence are from Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* (London and New York: Vergo, 1995), 7-46, p. 21.

²²⁹ Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* (London and New York: Vergo, 1995), 7-46, p. 41. See also, Norman Geras, “Progress Without Foundations?” in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, edited by Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 158-170.

²³⁰ Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality” in *Truth and Progress*, 167-185, p. 172

²³¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 74. Rorty shares Judith Skhlar’s conception of liberalism as the conviction that cruelty is the greatest evil.

solidarity.

One of the most disconcerting things about Rorty's rejection of the principle of objectivity is thus his acceptance of moral provincialism. It leads him to write some startling things. In his "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality" he discusses the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia at the end of the last century in the following way:

We here in the safe, rich democracies feel about Serbian torturers and rapists as they feel about their Muslim victims: they are more like animals than like us. [...] We think of Serbs or Nazis as animals, because ravenous beasts of prey are animals. We think of Muslims or Jews being herded into concentration camps as animals, because cattle are animals. Neither sort of animal is very much like us, and there seems no point in human beings getting involved in quarrels between animals.²³²

This attitude is an expression of Rorty's ethnocentrism and it seems surprising given his assertion that humans share ethically relevant similarities. Rorty seems to assert some conception of our commonality as a corrective to our provincial prejudices while at the same time denying the realism or universal truth of that commonality. Rorty may be right to claim that we do not need "an essence which is something more than our shared ability to suffer humiliation" but his limitation of that shared ability to those who fall under the right description adds an uncomfortable provincialism (and

²³² Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality" in *Truth and Progress*, 167-185, p. 168.

proto-colonialism) to his position. Rorty sees no way of asserting the reality of our common humanity without implying that it must point towards a metaphysical essence that reveals everything else about us to be “mere appearance”. Rorty’s treatment of realism never escapes this Platonic dogma. The idea that our representations do not capture such an essence leads him to claim that they do not represent reality at all. As a result, according to Rorty, we become trapped in Plato’s cave in the midst of ignorance and prejudice as “the work of changing moral intuitions is [...] done by manipulating our feelings rather than by increasing our knowledge”.²³³

The tension between Rorty’s ironism and liberalism is another consequence of his narrow conception of what realism entails. Throughout my criticism of Rorty I have tried to show how unnecessary that conception is. Contrary to Rorty’s argument we do not need a transcendent metaphysical viewpoint in order to capture reality. With representations that are immanent to our perspective it is possible to capture reality and consider whether the descriptions that people use in order to justify discrimination are true. This does not require the observation of a metaphysical essence. It simply involves recognizing whether our current descriptions accurately represent reality from the relevant perspective. We do not need to transcend our means of representation in order to have an appreciation of our commonality that can educate us out of the kind of invidious characterizations of other people that Rorty deploys in his assertion of cultural provincialism. In fact, we can have a conception of our commonality that is as non-Platonic, Darwinian and anti-essentialist as Rorty would like. That conception of our commonality might even extend across species

²³³ Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality” in *Truth and Progress*, 167-185, p. 172.

boundaries, as Peter Singer has argued, making Rorty's use of a moral distinction between humans and animals seem quaint.²³⁴ In this way we can appreciate the influence that an increase in knowledge *does* have on our moral intuitions.

Rorty is right when he criticizes human rights foundationalists for treating the differences between human beings as “mere appearance” when compared to their similarities. Much of Rorty's ethical provincialism is designed to emphasise the truth of those differences. The problem is that Rorty's alternative to such foundationalism has the effect of entrenching the prejudice that often accompanies those differences. In attempting to honour our differences Rorty leaves us ill-equipped to deal with ignorance and falsehood. Against Rorty, I would argue that it is perfectly possible to assert the reality of our common humanity without requiring a reductionist metaphysical conception of that commonality. We can appreciate the contingencies that contribute to our identity and consider the extent to which those contingencies make us both similar and different without elevating our similarities to another order of reality. By accepting the fact that our practice of representation (despite its contingency) is able to successfully capture reality we can challenge prejudice and falsehood without insisting that we need a transcendent viewpoint that reveals us all to be “essentially” and “in reality” the same. In short, we can retain the notion that there are transcultural universals which unite human beings without requiring a Platonic metaphysical conception of those universals.

Rorty describes his political philosophy as an attempt to substitute hope for knowledge.²³⁵ He regards the desire for knowledge as anathema because it seeks to

²³⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²³⁵ See *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp.21-90.

deny the creative aspect of language use. According to Rorty, we ought to acknowledge our creativity and embrace our ability to alter our world in line with our aspirations. The problem with this vision is that it would be a world in which the nature of things (including people) is determined by a culture's choice of description and the "weapons and luck" that it can muster to support that description. It would be a world in which the truth of our common humanity is contingent on the work of a particular culture's writers who seek to transform the subjects of their stories into "the right sort of human beings". Hope would not come from spreading knowledge and overcoming prejudice but from a kind of cultural imposition in which liberal writers bestow a person's humanity on them. It seems to me that Rorty's anti-realist irony cannot avoid these unfortunate implications whereas it is entirely possible to acknowledge the contingency and relativity of our descriptions without having to deny their realism. It is possible to have a conception of our common humanity that acknowledges its contingency without insisting that it thereby fails to represent reality. Admittedly this would rid the liberal's case of the argumentative weight that comes from giving it the status of an exclusive metaphysical truth but I would agree with Rorty that it is not entitled to that status in the first place. The belief that we share a common humanity should be considered a factual claim rather than a metaphysical one. The hope of the liberal is not that this belief will supplant or transcend appearances but that it will become universally apparent.

Rorty's notion that our sense of solidarity is dependent on the work of writers who seek to transform the subjects of their stories into "the right sorts of human beings" is an invitation to consider another example of real poetry. With this in mind I would like to consider the work of Tony Harrison in order to assess the hopes that

Rorty places in the power of creative art to generate solidarity.

Tony Harrison

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty argues that the projects of self-creation and the promotion of solidarity are necessarily supported by bourgeois achievements like literacy, higher education, social mobility, leisure and the freedom of the press, judiciary, elections and universities.²³⁶ In Rorty's liberal utopia intellectuals would be ironists, although non-intellectuals would not:

The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist. So they would see themselves as contingent through and through, without feeling doubts about the contingencies they happen to be.²³⁷

Only the intellectual elite would express discontent with the status quo. As far as ironist intellectuals are concerned, Rorty says that in trying to create a new vocabulary they are trying to alienate themselves from the conventional vocabulary that other people accept. They must also believe that it is possible to create a new language that they can be reconciled to:

²³⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 67.

²³⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 87.

“Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive.”²³⁸

Resentment is avoided by maximising the quality of education, freedom of the press, educational opportunities and opportunities to exert political influence. Those who do not have access to these freedoms must be reconciled to the process of socialization that they have undergone. According to the tradition of working class poetry, however, this reconciliation is very difficult. Writing about working class poetry, Luke Spencer has said that Douglas Dunn “was able to acknowledge, as Orwell had done thirty years before, both the oppositional imperative of working class writing and the inescapable dilemma posed for it by bourgeois cultural dominance.”²³⁹ Working class writing highlights an acute problem with the possibility that opportunities to experiment with self-creation may not be universal. It exhibits a division in our society that makes solidarity difficult.

Tony Harrison was born into the working class in Leeds during the forties and grew up with first-hand experience of the political and cultural dominance of the educated classes. He also proved to be an academic success, which was how he got to articulate that experience. His collection of sonnets called *The School of Eloquence* registers the implications of his struggle to infiltrate our “glorious heritage.”²⁴⁰ Harrison traces his awareness of his exclusion from that glory back to the teaching of his schoolmaster, as portrayed in “Them and [uz]”:

²³⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 88.

²³⁹ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 6.

²⁴⁰ Tony Harrison, “Them and [uz]”, in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 122-123, line 5.

‘Poetry’s the speech of Kings. You’re one of those
Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose.
All poetry (even Cockney Keats?) you see
‘s been dubbed by [vs] into RP,
Received Pronunciation please believe [vs]
Your speech is in the hands of the Receivers.’²⁴¹

Our poetic heritage established models for evaluating and creating poetry that require refinement and erudition. Members of the working class are unable to express their expectations in a way that is adequate to these standards. Our heritage is preserved in a way that suppresses forms of self-expression that are native to the working class. Harrison, however, has a familiarity and sympathy with the working class as well as a middle class education. In “Classics society” Harrison is seen to straddle the “*dreadful schism in the British nation*”²⁴² that Edmund Burke believed would precipitate the uprising of the working class against the establishment. In “Them and [uz]” Harrison claims poetry for himself and for those who are silenced by the requirements of the education system.

So right, yer buggers, then. We’ll occupy
Your lousy, leasehold poetry.”²⁴³

However there is a problem. What can you occupy poetry with when, as a class, your

²⁴¹ Harrison, “Them and [uz]”, in *Selected Poems*, pp. 122-123, lines 7-12.

²⁴² Harrison, “Classics Society”, in *Selected Poems*, p. 120, line 16.

²⁴³ Harrison, “Them and [uz]”, in *Selected Poems*, pp. 122-123, lines 17-18.

cultural identity has not been expressed. Once more, one can appropriate Luke Spencer's use of Dunn in considering Harrison's project:

The best way of negotiating that dilemma, Dunn argued, is "commitment ... the idea under which a working-class poet can organise the sundry circumstances that belong to him and which cohere in the form of beliefs about the world". This offers genuine hope of bringing poetry into a mutually beneficial relationship to politics; of enabling the poet to 'see poetry as the vision of its own classless society.'²⁴⁴

These words chime with Rorty's idea that poetry and politics can offer social hope through the creation of self-images that people can be reconciled to. However, according to Luke Spencer, Dunn's vision of working class commitment "fosters resentment – a grudge – towards those who have relegated poetry to an instrument of their own class ascendancy"²⁴⁵. This commitment is necessary "to keep that grudge intact: its purity will help to prevent the dilution and assimilation of the working-class poet's emancipatory project"²⁴⁶.

As I said in my discussion of Plath, Rorty distrusts resentment both on a private level and on a public level. He argues against it on a philosophical level because, as

²⁴⁴ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, p. 6. In this passage Spencer is quoting from Douglas Dunn's editorial called 'The Grudge', written for *Stand* (1975), pp. 4-6.

²⁴⁵ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, p. 6.

²⁴⁶ Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, p. 6.

he says:

They tend to accept some version of the story of the West as a long slide downhill from better days (the time of ‘organic community’ or ‘the *polis*’ or some such – a time before ‘structures of power’ started scrawling all over us). They see no redeeming features in the present, except perhaps for their own helpless rage.²⁴⁷

Accusing Foucault of “anarchistic moments” in which he concludes that “every social institution is equally unjustifiable” because all of them exert “normalising power”, Rorty says:

Only if one refuses to divide the public from the private realm will one dream of a society which has “gone beyond mere social democracy”, or dream of “total revolution.” Only then will anarchism begin to seem attractive. Only then will one be tempted to use a pejorative term like “discourse of power” to describe the results of *any* social compromise, *any* political balancing act.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Rorty, “Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 177-192 (p. 184).

²⁴⁸ This and the three preceding quotes come from Rorty’s essay “Moral identity and private autonomy: The case of Foucault”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 193-198 (pp. 196-197).

Resentment is a reluctance to play inherited language-games, or to reconcile yourself to any language-game that you can think of. To think, according to the Resenters, is to submit to a power that you cannot call your own. This brand of hatred is not the result of failing to realise your aspirations but a refusal to entertain any kind of aspiration in the first place. As Rorty puts it:

[...] the difference between us and the Resenters is that we regret our lack of imagination, whereas they make a virtue of what they think a philosophic-historical necessity.²⁴⁹

Mirroring Rorty's hope that the liberal poet can work within social democracy and replace resentment with solidarity Harrison wants to reconcile the need to give the working-class a voice with the liberal hope that he can provide them with a self-image that they can call their own and can endorse. However, because the schism that Harrison wants to straddle is one between an educated class that prizes articulacy and a working class that does not, an extra difficulty is added. In an analogous situation to Plath's partially articulated quasi-selves, Harrison's working class voice comprises a "mute ingloriousness"²⁵⁰

To illustrate the exclusion of his class from the means to articulate their expectations, Harrison shows the shadowy presence that labourers have in our history. In "The Ballad of Babelabour" all that labourers are seen to leave behind are the

²⁴⁹ Rorty, "Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 177-192 (p. 184).

²⁵⁰ Harrison, "On Not Being Milton", in *Selected Poems*, p. 112, line 12.

buildings that house their master and confine their fellows:

They're their own meat and their own dough
Another block another
a place for the great Pharaoh
a prison for their brothers²⁵¹

This particular poem is vitriolic and represents the confrontational vein in Harrison's poetry. It is fair to assume that any project seeking to articulate the suffering of victims, so that such suffering is acknowledged by those who are responsible for it, might be hindered if those responsible are offended or humiliated. Engendering guilt and humiliation can be seen to create the kind of obstacles that get in the way of a person's attempts to converse with their unconscious. To satisfy Rorty's requirement that literature should sensitise people to suffering rather than perpetuate the schism that prevents solidarity, it might be that the depth of feeling on both sides has to be subdued. With this in mind, there are less scathing poems in Harrison's canon, for example "The Earthen Lot" and the first poem of "The Rubarbarians". In the latter, the Yorkshire cropper's rebellion is only accessible through the testimonies of the mill-owners. The mob is reduced to "shadows in moonlight"²⁵². They are a sketchy presence in history and in, as Harrison puts it in "On Not Being Milton", "the silence round all poetry"²⁵³. We can see here how this project is not just waged on a private level. The standards by which poetry is valued have to be changed to accommodate

²⁵¹ Harrison, "The Ballad of Babelabour", in *Selected Poems*, pp. 102-103, lines 9-12.

²⁵² Harrison, "The Rubarbarians", in *Selected Poems*, pp. 113-114, line 12.

²⁵³ Harrison, "On Not Being Milton", in *Selected Poems*, pp. 122-123, line 14.

Harrison's working class voice. In "Earthen Lot" the bones of the dead masons who constructed "a solid bulwark for their betters"²⁵⁴ jostle as if they cannot rest peacefully until they are appeased. The sentiment in these poems seems to be a mournful acknowledgement of what is lost. But they betray the need to encapsulate working class experience and voices in ways that pursue the need for solidarity without minimizing the suffering that characterizes that experience.

"Fire-eater" sees Harrison using metaphors of magic to describe the role he has made for himself. He intends to turn the grammatically confused utterances of his relatives into a new language:

I'm the clown sent to clear the ring.
Their's are the tongues of fire I'm forced to swallow
then bring back knotted, one continuous string
igniting long-pent silences, and going back
to Adam fumbling with creation's names,
and though my vocal cords get scorched and black
there'll be a constant singing from the flames.²⁵⁵

The idea of fumbling with names that are original to his class echoes "The Ballad of Babelabour" in which the Ur-language of the labourers is seen to remain a resentful "ur-grunt"²⁵⁶ It has not been able to develop because poetry has failed to encapsulate the actual condition of the working class:

²⁵⁴ Harrison, "The Earthen Lot", in *Selected Poems*, p. 179, line 5.

²⁵⁵ Harrison, "Fire-eater", in *Selected Poems*, p. 168, lines 9-12.

²⁵⁶ Harrison, "The Ballad of Babelabour", in *Selected Poems*, pp. 102-103, line 3.

Ur-crappers tongueless bardless nerks
Your conditions shitty
No time for your Collected Works
Or modulated pity²⁵⁷

Again we are reminded that the leap that is needed would involve making poetry a much less bourgeois medium. In “Working” this idea of forging a more representative language is developed further, but pessimistically:

You strike and plenty, but can’t see.
You’ve been underneath too long to stand the light.
You’re lost in this sonnet for the bourgeoisie.²⁵⁸

This poem expresses a desire to break the silence of neglected workers; like the worker called Patience, to whom the poem is addressed. The fire where the image of Patience’s skull is seen to shine echoes the urge in “Fire-eater” to ignite “long-pent silences”. However, Patience herself is lost in those sparks and a closer engagement with her experience comes when you close your eyes to the fire:

[...] that makes a dark like mines²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Harrison, “The Ballad of Babelabour”, in *Selected Poems*, pp. 102-103, lines 25-28.

²⁵⁸ Harrison, “Working”, in *Selected Poems*, p. 124, lines 6-8.

I interpret the words “the job/’s breaking the silence”²⁶⁰ in this poem as expressing a lack of confidence in the poet’s ability to penetrate that darkness rather than as an affirmation of the poet’s role. In “Cremation” the resentment that marks Harrison’s background and class forms an impenetrable grudge. In this poem the coal miner expresses his contempt for the contingencies that have shaped him. He has contracted a fatal disease from his time in the mines. There are no words spoken, but between him and his wife their emotions are expressed in gesture and an almost telepathic sensitivity to each other’s moods. Their suffering is private, silent and bitter:

He hawks his cold gobful at the brightest flame,
Too practiced, too contemptuous to miss.

Behind the door she hears the hot coals hiss.²⁶¹

Although Harrison can elevate this situation to one of beauty through poetry, his hope that he can articulate the aspirations that these people might have seems to be a vain one. The doubt about, and resentment towards, the contingencies that these people face run very deep. They are closed off from a sense of solidarity that is spread any wider than their immediate community. It is impossible to imagine a re-description of their situation that allowed them to be reconciled to the contingencies they are. They cannot be offered a self-image that is not just a dignified recognition of their

²⁵⁹ Harrison, “Working”, in *Selected Poems*, p. 124, line 14.

²⁶⁰ Harrison, “Working”, in *Selected Poems*, p. 124, lines 15-16.

²⁶¹ Harrison, “Cremation”, in *Selected Poems*, p. 125, lines 14-15.

suffering. The liberal author's recognition that we are all susceptible to suffering offers little consolation and does not necessarily promote solidarity.

The "Divisions" sequence marks the start of Harrison's treatment of this cultural crisis. The first poem in the sequence is a portrait of an unemployed, skinhead football hooligan. Tattoos, graffiti and violence constitute the signs of his self-expression:

Brown Ale and boy's bravado numbs their fright –
MOTHER in ivy, blood reds and true blues
Against that North East skin so sunless white.

When next he sees United lose a match,
His bovvers on, his scarf round his wrist,
His rash NEWCASTLE RULES will start to scratch,
He'll aerosol the walls, then go get pissed [...] ²⁶²

Here the contingencies that shape this man have generated a willfully cruel and vandalising threat. In "v." the graffiti motif appears again as an impoverished form of self-expression. Rather than articulating their resentment in accessible forms, vandals take to aerosolling obscenities onto grave stones:

This graveyard stands above a worked out pit.
Subsidence makes the obelisks all list.

²⁶² Harrison, "Divisions", in *Selected Poems*, p. 173, lines 6-12.

One leaning left's marked FUCK, one Right's marked SHIT
Sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed.²⁶³

The aggression behind this damage comes to the fore when a skinhead appears as Harrison's alter ego in "v.". Rather than being a non-intellectual he is an anti-intellectual:

*Don't talk to me of fucking representing
The class yer were born into any more.
Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting
It's not poetry we need in this class war.*²⁶⁴

The reference to a football team "UNITED"²⁶⁵ sprayed on one stone, is taken by Harrison as an unintentionally ironic statement of exactly what is missing from this relationship. The difficulty in engaging with this alter ego's ingrained animosity personifies and dramatises the conflict at the heart of Harrison's project. Harrison can only wish that something positive could come from the grudging relationship between his role as poet and the content he is trying to capture in it:

I wish in this skin's words deep aspirations,²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Harrison, "v.", in *Selected Poems*, pp. 235-249, lines 29-32.

²⁶⁴ Harrison, "v.", in *Selected Poems*, pp. 235-149, lines 265-268.

²⁶⁵ Harrison, "v." in *Selected Poems*, pp. 235-149, line 84.

²⁶⁶ Harrison, "v." in *Selected Poems*, pp. 235-149, line 173.

*Aspirations, cunt! Folk on't fucking dole
'ave got about as much scope to aspire
above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal
aspires to be chucked on't fucking fire.*²⁶⁷

Harrison's poetry becomes impotent in the face of the kind of vandalism that says all you need to know about the resentment and the lack of aspiration fostered by those who have committed it. Rorty says that he wants to confine irony to intellectuals and he wants liberal authors to promote solidarity but he does admit that nominalists and historicists cannot "claim that adopting [their] re-description of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshalled against you."²⁶⁸ They can only offer "recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation."²⁶⁹ Recognition of this common danger is supposed to promote solidarity between us. But if the danger is already realised in the contingencies that you happen to be, and there is no shared power for ensuring your freedom from it, you may be more likely to be resentful and unlikely to feel any solidarity.

According to Rorty, there is nothing stopping us from using metaphors as tools for "grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations." We can encapsulate the idiosyncratic contingencies that shape us and by re-describing those contingencies we can bring our circumstances into line with our aspirations. In the course of his writings Rorty has tried to bring our circumstances into line with "a lightly sketched

²⁶⁷ Harrison, "v." in *Selected Poems*, pp. 235-149, lines 177-180.

²⁶⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 91.

²⁶⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 91.

future”²⁷⁰ in which individuals are able to appropriate their idiosyncrasies and create autonomous selves. It is also a future in which our resistance to difference is relaxed and in which we are not too obsessed with our private projects of self-creation. It is from the social theory of Roberto Unger and Cornelius Castoriadis that Rorty gains confidence in our ability to overcome descriptions of ourselves that deflate these aspirations:

For all who participate in such an undertaking, the disharmony between intent and presence must be a cause of rage. We neither suppress this rage nor allow it the last word, because we do not give the last word to the historical world we inhabit. We build with what we have and willingly pay the price for the inconformity of vision to circumstance.²⁷¹

Every constraint on our private and collective projects of self-creation is just “the fossilized product of some past act of imagination”²⁷². Loosening those constraints is a matter of digging up those fossils and mobilising them again. But in our consideration of some actual struggles to bring some circumstances into line with Rorty’s aspirations, we have seen how difficult it is to loosen such constraints. As a result we have seen what it means to pay the price for “the inconformity of vision to

²⁷⁰ Rorty, “Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 177-192 (p. 183)..

²⁷¹ Roberto Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Cambridge; Mass, Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 118-119. Rorty uses this passage in his paper, ‘Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future’, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 177-192 (p. 183).

²⁷² Rorty, “Unger Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future”, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 177-192 (p. 186).

circumstance.”

Sylvia Plath found it difficult to work against the resistance of her inherited femininity in trying to articulate a sense of alienation that was incompatible with that femininity. Rorty’s idea that we can take a relaxed attitude towards the disquieting beliefs and desires that comprise our unconscious was found to be difficult in Plath’s case. Plath’s project is particularly pertinent to Rorty’s because the desire to attend to the needs of others is not insignificant to Rorty but it would have had to have been less significant for Plath if she was going to relax her resistance to her sense of alienation. As a result, Plath became deeply troubled by the conflict between her romantic poetic aspirations and the deferral of autonomy that was necessary for her sense of devotion. Solidarity became a false substitute for self-creation and simply reminded her of the difficulty of that project.

Rorty describes the attainment of autonomy as requiring the attainment of “the full glory of humanity”. This is something that comes from seeing yourself “steadily and whole”. This is “the kind of coherence and integrity we think of as characteristic of full persons”. Even when two quasi selves are in a stand-off, Rorty says:

Rather than feel that splits are tearing them apart, they can see tensions among their alternative self-descriptions as, at worst, necessary elements in a harmonious variety in unity.²⁷³

²⁷³ This and the preceding two quotes come from Rorty’s, “Feminism and Pragmatism”, in *Truth and Progress*, 202-227 (p. 221).

As an example of the possibility of this kind of self-creation Rorty uses the example of Adriene Rich's description of her situation:

She was, she says, "split between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself as writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationship with men."²⁷⁴

This is a description of a woman trying to create herself in her own terms and thus doing what men have done throughout history. For Plath, however, the hope of a gradual development of autonomy conflicted with the deferral of autonomy that was necessary to her sense of devotion. That deferral turned into resentment because her desire for autonomy was frustrated. Her poem "Stillborn" points to her fears about her distraction from her children. Managing this split by maintaining a "harmonious variety-in-unity" was not possible for Plath. Her doubts about her emancipatory project show a genuine problem with the attempt to separate a realm of private self-creation from our social selves.

In Tony Harrison's poetry the distinction between the intellectual and the non-intellectual appears as a form of exclusion and elitism. This creates a problem with the poet's attempts to articulate solidarity and offer it to people who feel excluded from the means to self-create. There remains a close-knit (and often resentful) communal sympathy for a particular set of contingencies. Such contingencies are

²⁷⁴ Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism", in *Truth and Progress*, 202-227 (p. 220). Here he quotes from Rich's *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 40.

unmoved by the poet's attempt at re-description. Although Rorty does not want to give the last word to the historical circumstances that we inhabit, sometimes the historical world we inhabit takes the last word. Rorty's attempt to treat our self-descriptions as merely metaphors that we can re-describe in line with our aspirations is shown to be highly problematic.

Having highlighted some of the difficulties involved in the political aspect of Rorty's anti-representationalism, I would now like to turn back to the question of how to conceive of an alternative to Rorty's position. I will do this by considering the various positions that Putnam has adopted over the course of his philosophical career. The intention is to conceive of a form of representationalism that avoids absolutism while also doing justice to our realism.

Chapter 5 - Corresponding to Reality

Identity Thinking

Over the course of my discussion of Rorty's work I have repeatedly criticized him for founding his anti-representationalist philosophy on too narrow a conception of what realism can mean. Much of what I have said is an attempt to pursue the idea that there is more to say about the possibilities within realism and representationalism. Rorty rejects the practice of representation because he associates it with a concept of mirroring that demands a single identical "copy" of reality. In opposition to this I have sought an alternative understanding of the concepts of representation and realism. Rorty regards himself as an exponent of the pragmatist tradition in philosophy. He regards his position as continuous with William James' attempt to depart from the notion that our concepts "copy" reality. James' pragmatism sought to change the way that we conceive of our relation to reality so that a concept could be considered true provided it was an expedient way of dealing with reality rather than an accurate way of "corresponding" to it. James was attempting to account for the way in which our concepts are not simply a copy of reality but a man-made formula that is shaped by human interests. Rorty's brand of pragmatism takes this course to the point of rejecting altogether the notion of representation. According to Rorty, language has no representational relationship to reality. Language is more like a tool than a representation. We cannot assure ourselves that any one of our representations

“corresponds” to reality absolutely and so the epistemologist’s attempt to provide such assurance is a lost cause and it is better to abandon the concept of representation altogether. In opposition to this I have argued that our inability to assure ourselves that we possess an identical “mirror-like” copy of reality does not require us to abandon representationalism and realism. In this chapter I would like to say more about the alternative concepts of realism and representationalism that I have been developing.

One philosopher who has also expressed the belief that there is more to say about the possibilities within realism is Hilary Putnam. He is another exponent of the pragmatist tradition who has come to agree with Rorty that our concepts are irrevocably shaped by human contingency and that the conception of realism that demands a single and neutral “God’s-Eye” view of reality is untenable. Despite this, Putnam’s approach differs from Rorty’s precisely because he has striven to remain a realist. Putnam shares Rorty’s aversion to metaphysical realism and its attempt to pare our different forms of description down to a single neutral one and yet he does not see the need to abandon realism. Putnam agrees that it does not make sense to try and conceive of the nature of reality independently of a particular conceptual context but he denies that the truth of our descriptions must therefore be considered a matter of mere convention. Putnam argues that once we choose a mode of description the truth of our descriptions is determined by the way reality is. For example, if I choose to describe the room I am in by counting the number of chairs that are in it the truth of my description is determined by the number of chairs that are really there. I may have chosen to describe the room using a set of concepts that does not include chairs (for example the language of particle physics) but given my choice of concepts the truth of

my description is determined by the nature of reality. In *The Many Faces of Realism* Putnam advocates his “internal realism” in opposition to what he calls “seventeenth-century objectivism”, which he defines as the belief that our concepts of ordinary objects (such as chairs) are false projections onto the microphysical reality that is described by modern physics.²⁷⁵ Such objectivism is a form of the same reductionism that Rorty associates with realism. It is an expression of the desire for “a single language sufficient to state all the truths there are to state”. In response, Putnam argues that it is possible to realistically represent reality in different ways depending on the set of concepts that is used.

Seventeenth-century objectivism (and reductionism in general) holds that only one among our various forms of description “cuts reality at the joints”. I have argued that it is possible to conceive of reality as having numerous sets of joints for our descriptions to cut it. An important thing to note about Putnam’s argument for internal realism is that he finds such talk of joints problematic. In his “Truth and Convention” Putnam takes issue with what he calls the “cookie cutter” conception of realism. He uses an example from logic to claim that different logical doctrines can provide incompatible conceptions of reality that are equally correct. One logical doctrine might state that a world containing three individuals contains three objects. According to Lezniewski’s doctrine of mereology, however, for every two individuals there is an object which is their sum and therefore a world containing three individuals actually contains seven objects. Putnam argues that, instead of making sense of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, the “cookie cutter” metaphor actually denies the phenomenon:

²⁷⁵ Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LasSalle Illinois: Open Court, 1987), 3-21.

It is to say that there is a single world (think of it as a piece of dough) which we can slice into pieces in different ways. But this “cookie cutter” metaphor founders on the question, “What are the parts of this dough? If the answer is that x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , x_1+x_2 , x_1+x_3 , x_2+x_3 , $x_1+x_2+x_3$, are all the different “pieces,” then we have not a neutral description, but rather a partisan description – just the description of the Warsaw logician!²⁷⁶

It has to be said that Putnam’s use of such examples is confusing in this context because it is not clear that such logical doctrines require a realistic interpretation in the first place.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the above quote illustrates one of the key assumptions at play in Putnam’s argument. The problem with the cookie cutter metaphor is that it implies that there must be a “neutral” conception of reality that describes those parts that are intrinsic to reality. Putnam associates the idea of capturing reality’s intrinsic nature with the idea of having a single and neutral God’s-Eye view of it. He shares the concept of reality’s intrinsic nature with the concept that Rorty employs when he rejects the “Platonic quest [to] get behind appearances to the intrinsic nature of things”. That concept conceives of reality’s intrinsic nature as something that belies its varying appearances. Putnam prefers an approach that eschews the question of reality’s intrinsic nature:

²⁷⁶ Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 96-104, p. 97.

²⁷⁷ Martin Gardener makes this point in his essay “How Not to Talk About Mathematics”. Gardener states that formal systems such as logic, mathematics and geometry say nothing of the real world until we apply “correspondence rules which link such ideal concepts as points and lines to observed physical structures”.²⁷⁷ Until we interpret them realistically there is no reason to regard such potentially incompatible abstract systems as descriptions of reality. Martin Gardner, ‘How Not to Talk About Mathematics’ in *The Night Is Large: Collected Essays, 1938-95* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) p, 291. For further discussion of this point see Christopher Norris, *Hilary Putnam: Realism, Reason and the Uses of Uncertainty* (Manchester University Press, 2002), pp, 8-37.

Internal realism says that we don't know what we are talking about when we talk about "things in themselves". And this means that the dichotomy between "intrinsic" properties and properties which are not intrinsic also collapses - collapses because the "intrinsic" properties were supposed to be just the properties things have "in themselves".²⁷⁸

Putnam defines the intrinsic nature of reality as a metaphysical reality that is alien to our concepts and concludes that we ought to do away with the notion altogether. He argues that the dichotomy between the intrinsic and the extrinsic must collapse in such a way that the intrinsic is eliminated.

In this regard Putnam's argument is very similar to Rorty's. Rorty defines his pragmatism as an attack on the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic in which the intrinsic drops out of the picture. To illustrate the similarity between Rorty's and Putnam's arguments compare the following quotes. The first is from Putnam's *The Many Faces of Realism* and the second is from Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*:

The deep systematic root of the disease [the disease being metaphysical realism] lies in the notion of an "intrinsic" property, a property something has "in itself", apart from any contribution made by language or the mind.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LasSalle Illinois: Open Court, 1987), p. 36.

²⁷⁹ Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LasSalle Illinois: Open Court, 1987), p. 8.

For pragmatists, there is no such thing as a nonrelational feature of X, any more than there is such a thing as the intrinsic nature, the essence, of X. So there can be no such thing as a description which matches the way X really is, apart from its relation to human needs or consciousness or language.²⁸⁰

Putnam's argument in the first passage is virtually indistinguishable from Rorty's in the second passage despite Putnam's attempt to define himself as a realist. When they both state that the notion of an intrinsic property must be disposed of it becomes hard to tell the difference between the two (Rorty himself expresses puzzlement over Putnam's attempts to distinguish his position during this period).²⁸¹ The problem seems to be that Putnam shares Rorty's reductionist and absolutist conception of an intrinsic property and thereby agrees with Rorty that all properties must be regarded as extrinsic (or at least not intrinsic) to reality. Despite his assertion that the truth of our descriptions is determined by the nature of reality Putnam denies that our descriptions of reality capture its intrinsic nature. By jettisoning the notion of reality's intrinsic nature Putnam seems to undermine his own realism.²⁸²

It is true that the existence of some of the properties that we ascribe to objects depends on the existence of the subject. Those properties are relative to the subject and are in large part extrinsic to the object. One example of such a property is "hard-

²⁸⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 50.

²⁸¹ See Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace" in *Truth and Progress*, Philosophical Papers, Volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁸² Christopher Norris makes the same point in *Hilary Putnam: Realism, Reason and the Uses of Uncertainty* (Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 186. Norris presents a comprehensive survey of the changes that have occurred in Putnam's position since the 1970's as he has retreated from his earlier causal realist stance - via his internal realism - to his more recent "natural" or "commonsense" realism. Norris argues that Putnam's departure from his early causal realism marks too large a concession to the sceptical arguments of figures like Rorty.

to-moveness”.²⁸³ The existence of this property depends more on the incapability of the subject that is trying to move the object than on anything inherent in the object. However, Rorty and Putnam argue that this kind of extrinsic nature is typical of *all* properties. To illustrate the difference between this position and realism consider two different properties that we refer to using the term “red”. We use the term “red” to refer to a property of certain objects that reflect specific wavelengths of light. We also use the term to refer to the colour of the subject’s experience of that light. Objects would continue to reflect specific wavelengths of light without any subject to experience the corresponding colour. In order for the quality of the subject’s experience to exist a subject capable of having the experience needs to exist. The existence of the first property referred to by the term “red” does not require a contribution by the subject and the second one does. The tendency of objects to reflect specific wavelengths of light is intrinsic to reality in the sense that it does not require any extrinsic contribution by the subject in order to exist. Putnam might object that there would be no such thing as a “property” or “the tendency to reflect light” without our concepts of them but in order to maintain realism it is important not to allow the distinction between reality and our concepts to collapse in such a way that reality’s intrinsic nature drops out of the picture. It is true that all our concepts require a contribution from us in order to exist but the reality that they supposedly represent does not. Part of the problem with Putnam’s internal realism seems to be his failure to distinguish between the idea that a property is a concept and therefore extrinsic to the reality that it describes and the idea that a property is whatever the concept describes that is intrinsic to reality. Failing to make that distinction implies that reality either does not have an intrinsic nature or that its intrinsic nature is irrelevant to our

²⁸³ Rorty uses this example in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 185.

descriptions. It is hard to equate Putnam's position with realism given that he agrees with Rorty that there is no intelligible way to preserve the idea that any property is intrinsic to reality.²⁸⁴ The fundamental issue between Rorty's position and realism seems to be the question of whether there is any intelligible way to preserve that idea.

It should be said that Putnam has more recently distanced himself from the argument of his internal realist period. In a piece written in the early 90's called "The Question of Realism" Putnam resolves "*not* to state my own doctrine as a doctrine of the dependence of the way things are on the way we talk".²⁸⁵ Putnam concedes that previous statements of his may seem to express a kind of linguistic idealism that fails to clearly understand what is meant by reality's independent existence. He tries to put this right by clarifying his thought:

That the sky is blue is causally independent of the way we talk; for, with our language in place, we can certainly say that the sky would still be blue even if we did not use colour words (unless, of course, we affected that colour in some ordinary causal way, say, by producing more smog). [...] In any sense of "independent" I can understand, whether the sky is blue is independent of the way we talk.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴ Donald Davidson distinguishes his own position from Putnam's for similar reasons: "My form of realism seems to be neither Hilary Putnam's internal realism nor his metaphysical realism. It is not internal realism because internal realism makes truth relative to a scheme, and this is an idea I do not think is intelligible. A major reason, on fact, for accepting a coherence theory is the unintelligibility of the dualism of conceptual scheme and a "world" waiting to be coped with." Davidson "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge". See *Reading Rorty* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1990), 120-138, p. 122. Davidson has since given up trying to provide any *explanation* or *analysis* of truth although he stands by his criticisms of Putnam's analysis. See his 1987 afterword to "A Coherence Theory" in *Reading Rorty*.

²⁸⁵ Hilary Putnam, "The Question of Realism" in *Words and Life*, J. Conant (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 295-312.

²⁸⁶ Hilary Putnam, "The Question of Realism" in *Words and Life*, p. 301.

Despite this clarification, however, Putnam sticks by his earlier definition of an intrinsic property. He continues to argue that in order to regard a property (or set of properties) as intrinsic to reality it would have to be “the *one* description that captures the intrinsic properties”.²⁸⁷ He still shares Rorty’s reductionist and absolutist conception of reality’s intrinsic nature and argues that the occurrence of conceptual relativity renders the idea that we capture reality’s intrinsic nature redundant:

[...] what is common to all versions of this more metaphysical realism is the notion that there is – in a philosophically privileged sense of “object” – a definite Totality of All Real Objects and a fact of the matter as to which properties of those objects are the intrinsic properties and which are, in some sense, perspectival.²⁸⁸

Putnam continues to assume that the concept of reality’s intrinsic nature cannot be divorced from the kind of reductionist and absolutist realism that demands a single, neutral God’s-Eye view of reality. According to Putnam, the notion of reality’s intrinsic nature is inextricably linked to the idea of a metaphysical reality that belies our various representations.

Rorty insists that there is no intelligible way to preserve the distinction between a concept and whatever that concept represents. The relation of correspondence that supposedly exists between them is opaque to us because we can only describe this “whatever” by using further concepts. On this basis Rorty argues

²⁸⁷ Hilary Putnam, “The Question of Realism” in *Words and Life*, p. 305.

²⁸⁸ Hilary Putnam, “The Question of Realism” in *Words and Life*, p. 303.

that reality can quite easily drop out of the picture. Rorty's conception of what remains once the dichotomy between the intrinsic and extrinsic collapses calls to mind the last stage of "How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth" in Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*. In that piece Nietzsche famously describes a series of stages in which humanity casts off the idea of a remote reality that belies appearances. He ends with the following thought:

We have abolished the real world: what is left? The apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*

Nietzsche insists that if we abolish one side of the opposition between reality and appearances then we must abolish the other. If the dichotomy between the intrinsic and the extrinsic collapses then neither must predominate. The purpose of abolishing that unattainable "real world" is to replace it with a reality that is attainable. The purpose is to overcome the problem of scepticism by treating reality not as something that stands apart from appearances but as something that does appear to us. This is why "the apparent world" (conceived of as something false) must be abolished. Nietzsche suggests that what he calls "the longest error" will only be corrected once we have conceived of reality as something that is amenable to representation (and conceived of representations as something that can be realistic). From Rorty's point of view, the whole notion of the practice of representation must be abolished because the longest error is inherent in it. Rorty argues that we cannot conceive of the practice of representation without opposing the way reality "really is" to our representations.

Rorty insists that the way reality “really is” must be conceived of as an intrinsic nature that belies our various extrinsic representations. Rorty’s solution is to abandon the whole notion of reality’s intrinsic nature and treat all properties as relative to our descriptions. The problem with this solution is that it eliminates one term of the opposition instead of reconciling both terms. A genuine solution would have to maintain some sense in which reality’s intrinsic nature can appear to us otherwise we would merely be consigned to “the apparent world”.

In my exposition of Nietzsche’s work I suggested that his own eventual solution was to uncouple the notion of reality’s intrinsic nature from the notion of a metaphysical reality that belies appearances. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche agrees with the view expressed by Rorty and Putnam that we must guard against the idea that we could have a single, neutral God’s-Eye view of reality. Despite this, Nietzsche does not rule out objectivity. He describes the dichotomy between the intrinsic and extrinsic collapsing in such a way that reality’s intrinsic nature does not drop out of the picture:

There is *only* a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival “knowing”; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our “concept” of this matter, our “objectivity” be.²⁸⁹

The phrase “that much more complete will our “concept” of this matter [...] be” suggests that there is more to an object than a single representation can capture.

²⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morality*, “Third Treatise: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?” §12

Nietzsche suggests that we need not associate the concept of an object's intrinsic nature with something that belies its various appearances. An object's intrinsic nature is something that can be captured from multiple perspectives. This conception of reality satisfies Putnam's requirement that we regard the macrophysical world of ordinary objects to be as real as the microphysical world of sub-atomic particles but it does not require us to deny that those worlds capture reality's intrinsic nature. We can suppose that reality's intrinsic nature is captured by both. In response to seventeenth century objectivism we can suppose that the difference between a microphysical description and a macrophysical description is merely one of perspective. A microphysical description may be more accurate in the sense of being more finely grained (and more explanatorily basic) but that does not render the macrophysical description false or "mere appearance". They both capture the intrinsic nature of reality. They simply do so from different perspectives.

Nietzsche's description of one and the same object being captured from different perspectives is reminiscent of the cookie cutter metaphor that Putnam discards. We have seen that Putnam rejects that metaphor on the basis that there could only be one set of "parts" that are intrinsic to the reality being described. It seems to me, however, that the cookie cutter metaphor need not founder on the question "what are the parts of this dough?" if we avoid the urge to find a single and exclusive answer to that question. Reality could be thought to have numerous sets of "parts" or "joints". The key is to appreciate that each set only captures reality from one of a number of possible perspectives. In this way a representation can be considered relative to the subject (and its perspective) without that extrinsic factor obscuring the intrinsic nature of the object. The dichotomy between the extrinsic and the intrinsic can be collapsed

in such a way that neither is eliminated. By conceiving of reality as something that exceeds any single representation of it we can appreciate the contingencies that accompany the practice of representation (such as perspective) without questioning our realism. The fact that we cannot have a single neutral conception of reality need not be a problem if reality need not be reduced in that way. Reality need not be opposed to its various appearances if reality is regarded as extensive enough to be present in those appearances. If we conceive of reality as something that exceeds any single representation of it we can deny the need for a single and exclusive God's Eye view. We can deny that realism demands the kind of reductionism and absolutism that Rorty claims that it demands and undermine one of the main reasons behind his rejection of realism and representationalism.

The idea that one single and exclusive form of representation is capable of capturing all there is to reality could be seen as a species of what Theodor Adorno calls "identity thinking". Adorno defines identity thinking as the assumption that reality (the "non-identical") can be reduced to or identified with the subject's conception of it. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno's criticism of identity thinking is primarily aimed at idealists, like Hegel, who "exploited the fact that the nonidentical on its part can be defined only as a concept".²⁹⁰ Idealists do so in order to make subjectivity constitutive of objectivity. However, Adorno's criticism can also be applied to realists who suppose that reality can be reduced to or identified with a single representation of it. They both fail to preserve the non-identity of the non-identical and try to bring reality to identity. The idea that reality exceeds any single representation of it gives us some sense of what it means for reality to be non-identical to our representations. If a representation is always limited by its particular

²⁹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 185.

perspective then it cannot be identical to its object. As Nietzsche says, it is only by combining perspectives that we can get closer to a complete conception of the object. As far as Rorty is concerned, contingencies such as perspective are fatal to realism because realism demands nothing less than the mind's absolute identity to reality. As a consequence, all contingencies that compromise this absolute identity tell against realism. According to Rorty, the very act of representation compromises the realist's fantasy of identity because the act of representation involves contingencies that diminish that identity. Rorty argues that we should renounce the fantasy of absolute identity by giving up the concepts of representation and realism altogether. One might say that Rorty's anti-representationalist pragmatism is a radical form of "non-identity thinking". He encourages us to believe that our concepts are so lacking in identity with reality that they should not be considered representations at all.²⁹¹ They should be considered tools for coping with reality rather than representations that correspond to it. However, Nietzsche and Adorno offer an approach that seems to suggest there is a middle ground between identity and non-identity that involves a less absolute form of realism.

I have argued that the conception of realism that Rorty rejects has roots in Platonism. Plato imagined us leaving the cave and confronting reality directly. He imagined the mind casting off the contingencies of the practice of representation and achieving absolute identity with reality through contemplation of the Forms. When Rorty describes realism he does so in terms that echo this ideal of absolute "correspondence". For representationalists, that ideal is supposedly captured by the metaphor of "mirroring". Representationalists may not claim that the mind becomes

²⁹¹ For an alternative view that uses Adorno's concept of "identity thinking" in order to label Rorty as a "linguistic idealist" see Gideon Calder, *Rorty's Politics of Redescription* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp 48-52.

identical to reality in the sense of becoming the same thing as reality, but, according to Rorty, they do claim that the mind becomes identical to reality in the sense of becoming an identical “copy” of it. Where language is concerned, Rorty describes the requirement of correspondence as a requirement that our language is “something identical either with God or with the world as God’s project.” As I pointed out in the first chapter, this is a very narrow conception of what a representation has to be like in order to correspond to its object.²⁹² A representation need not be identical to its object in order to correspond to it. The distinction between identity and non-identity (or perhaps between the way reality “really is” and the way it “appears”) is not a binary opposition. There is a middle ground in which the practice of representation actually takes place. In this middle ground, a representation might not be identical to the object it represents but that does not mean that it necessarily misrepresents the object. The contingencies that shape a representation (such as its form, its perspective or its practical purpose) might stop that representation from being identical to its object but that does not necessarily stop it from corresponding to its object. The lack of identity that Rorty identifies between a representation and reality is not necessarily fatal to realism. It is only fatal to the ideal of the mind’s absolute identity to reality.

Rorty is right to question the ideal of the mind’s absolute identity to reality. He is right to point out that it relies on a notion of correspondence that derives from

²⁹² Putnam makes the same point in a lecture from 1975: “[...] something is conceivable if it is *represented* by a concept, it does not have to *be* a concept. No contradiction ensues if one believes that some things are not concepts and proceeds to talk about them. One is not thereby pretending to conceive the inconceivable; but only to conceptualize the nonmental. The genesis of this [sceptical] argument appears to be in Berkeley’s assumption that only *like* can represent *like*, where *likeness* is identified with phenomenal similarity. In this day of familiarity with abstract structure and with many novel and unintuitive methods of representing data, Berkeley’s assumption lacks credibility.” Putnam presents this argument in defense of the causal realist approach that he advocated in the early 1970’s before the development of his internal realism. See Hilary Putnam, “Language and Reality” in *Mind Language and Reality, Philosophical Papers Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 272-290, p. 273.

an idealized conception of representation – one that imagines reality being reduced to or identified with a single “mirror-like” representation of it. One of the supposed advantages of that ideal is that it promises to defeat scepticism. It promises to eliminate the lack of identity that threatens to open up when the practice of representation is employed. One of Rorty’s main objections to representationalism is that it makes scepticism a perennial problem. Representationalism places us at a remove from reality and prevents us from assuring ourselves that our representations correspond to reality. Without our mind’s absolute identity to reality the way reality “really is” becomes mysterious. However, the ideal of absolute identity sets a standard that cannot be met because it requires us to reduce reality to a single representation of it. The impossibility of attaining such an exclusive and identical “copy” of reality leads the realist to project that ideal onto reality so that reality is thought to comprise an intrinsic nature that belies our various representations. This, in a nutshell, is the worn out dialectic that Rorty seeks to escape by abandoning representationalism. Rorty assumes that realism and representationalism require the ideal of absolute identity and that the impossibility of attaining such identity renders them defunct. He effectively concedes the argument to the sceptic and concludes that we need to change the subject. However, there is no need for the realist to insist on the ideal of absolute identity, especially considering that it seems based on a misguided ontology according to which reality is able to be reduced to a single representation of it. The realist is entitled to argue that we do not need the ideal of absolute identity if reality need not be reduced in that way. Reality can be considered to “appear” in our representations through the relation of correspondence without that relation being one of absolute identity. Our empirical experience of ordinary objects,

for example, can be considered to correspond to reality despite the fact that it is not identical to reality. Our empirical experience is subject to all kinds of contingencies thanks to our “all too human” cognitive apparatus but that contingency only tells against realism if realism demands the mind’s absolute identity with reality. In addition, the realist is not obliged to choose one form of representation and claim that it uniquely exemplifies what it is like to correspond to reality. Although our empirical experience may correspond to reality the realist is not committed to reducing our conception of reality to that experience. Realism can accommodate other cognitive resources and forms of representation that allow us to broaden, deepen and refine our conception of reality beyond our experience.

Giving up the ideal of absolute identity allows the mystery surrounding reality to dissipate. It is the ideal of absolute identity that makes reality mysterious by demanding a single and exclusive representation of reality. Once we are reconciled to a less absolute kind of correspondence the sort of scepticism that is motivated by our lack of such an absolute loses traction. Reality can be thought to appear in our representations despite our inability to absolutely identify reality with any of those representations. Nor do we have to naively take a representation at face value as if it is identical to reality. The lack of absolute identity that opens up when the practice of representation is employed remains. Various contingencies determine our representations and compromise their absolute identity to reality. Adorno argues that the point of preserving the idea that our concepts are not identical with reality is that it motivates a critical attitude towards our concepts.²⁹³ If our concepts are never fully

²⁹³ Gideon Calder sums up Adorno’s argument in the following way: “[...] this, for Adorno, is idealism’s prime conceit: making immediate to consciousness that which is, in fact, never fully subsumable. It tries, but “fails to absorb entity, which is what objectivity is in essence”. The attempt involves the denial of the fact that “the object can exist without the subject in a way that the subject can

identical to reality then they are always open to criticism. By eliminating this lack of identity between reality and our concepts we run the risk of settling for the status quo. In response, Rorty would argue that it is realism that threatens to sediment our concepts by insisting that some of our representations correspond to reality absolutely. According to Rorty, it is realists who claim that reality can be subsumed by our concepts. Rorty insists that it is only when the intrinsic and the essential give way to the extrinsic and the contingent that our capacity for critique and transformation will be fully recognized. As we have seen, however, the realist is not committed to the claim that any of our representations are identical to reality. The realist can accept the contingencies that go into the practice of representation and can accept the need for a critical attitude towards our concepts. The realist does not have to subscribe to the absolutism that Rorty insists that they must subscribe to.

In response to all this, Rorty would ask how we are supposed to know that our representations are accurate? Even if the realist argues that reality has numerous sets of intrinsic “joints” for our representations to “cut at” there is still the question of where those joints really lie. How can we assure ourselves that our representations correspond to reality if we cannot transcend our representations and compare them to reality? We have a history of changing our conception of reality and on Rorty’s view this poses a serious problem for realism. So far in this chapter my treatment of the notion of representational relativity has concentrated on the problem of variation due to perspective and has not considered the problem of variation due to so-called “theory-change”. It is this problem that I would like to tackle in the next part of this

never exist without an object”. If the absorption succeeded, then the need for critical thinking, for a subtler understanding of the object, would be removed [...]” Gideon Calder, *Rorty’s Politics of Redescription* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 49-50. Calder quotes Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 185. Calder also quotes Carrie L. Hull, “The Need in Thinking”, *Radical Philosophy* 84 (1997), p. 29.

chapter.

Causal Realism Revisited

How do we know if our cookie cutter cuts reality the joints? In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty cites the example of motion and points out that our concept of gravitation has changed dramatically during the course of scientific inquiry. Aristotle's and Newton's theories of motion are so different that it is hard to claim that they are talking about the same thing. The notion that there is an intrinsic "part" of reality that we refer to when we use the term "gravitation" is problematic. We cannot describe what we mean or what we are talking about without reference to a particular theory and our theories periodically change. At times in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty's response to this consideration is relatively commonsensical:

Now in one obvious sense we know perfectly well – prior to any theory – that they have been referring to the same things. They were all trying to cope with the same universe, and they referred to *it*, although doubtless often under unfruitful and foolish descriptions. To discover, as a result of the next scientific revolution, that there are no genes, molecules, electrons, etc., [...] would still not put us out of touch with either the world or our ancestors. For we would proceed to tell the same sort of story of the emergence of better descriptions of the world out of false, confused, unfruitful, descriptions [...]²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p286.

In this passage, Rorty seems to endorse a form of commonsense realism. However, he argues that this kind of commonsense is not satisfying from a philosophical point of view. Philosophy has to provide something more than commonsense. The realist has to be able to refute the sceptic who claims that our dependency on theory *does* put us out of touch with reality. The realist philosophical position that Rorty seeks to debunk at this point in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was proposed by Putnam (building on the work of Saul Kripke) for that purpose. Before Putnam developed his internal realism he advocated an approach that took the referent of many of our terms to be intrinsic parts of reality. According to this “causal realist” approach, there is an external referent of our terms that remains fixed even though our internal (theory-relative) conception of what we are talking about may vary and change. This fixity of scope is created by an initial act of designation by which an intrinsic part of reality is referred to using a specific expression. All subsequent uses of that expression are causally linked to that initial designation despite changes in our conception of the nature of the referent. Putnam uses the example of natural kinds to illustrate how this principle works. Terms like “water” and “gold” denote parts of reality that have an intrinsic nature. Modern chemistry and physics have transformed our understanding of the nature of water and gold but the referent of the terms has not changed. Crucial to this conception of meaning is the belief that when we assert that a piece of metal is gold (for example) we are not just asserting that it shares certain contingent characteristics with other things. We are asserting that it shares the same essential characteristics as a specific part of reality. We may be wrong about its nature but we are still taking about the same intrinsic thing.

There are two principles that Putnam lays out in order to further clarify his

theory of reference. The first is The Principle of the Benefit of Doubt. This principle states that those who refer to a particular part of reality would accept reasonable modifications to their conception of what they are referring to.

If I describe a quark as “the particle responsible for such-and-such effects”, almost certainly it is going to turn out that no particle is responsible for exactly the effects I specified; but that does not mean that there aren’t quarks.²⁹⁵

This principle allows for a certain amount of imprecision in our conception of the part of reality that is referred to. We may not cut reality precisely at the joints because often terms are introduced into the language with the aid of descriptions (and contexts of belief) that turn out not to be entirely accurate. This is why it is difficult to claim that Aristotle and Newton are talking about the same thing when considering the different description that they gave of gravitation. This imprecision does not mean that we are out of touch with reality. It just means that our descriptions do not necessarily have total accuracy.²⁹⁶ Such imprecision accounts for our continuing need to revise and improve our understanding of certain parts of reality. The second principle is The Principle of Reasonable Ignorance. This principle states that “a

²⁹⁵ Hilary Putnam, “Language and Reality” in *Mind Language and Reality, Philosophical Papers Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 272-290, p. 277.

²⁹⁶ The philosopher Hartry Field has made a similar point in criticising Quine’s assertion that the terms of a theory only have meaning or denotation relative to their own theory. Field compares Newtonian mechanics to Einstein’s special theory of relativity and asks whether Newton’s term “mass” can be said to be meaningless or denotationless in the context of Einstein’s theory. He describes how a number of the claims that Newton made about mass are still considered true despite the change of theory. Newton’s term can be shown to partially mean or denote the same thing as Einstein’s term. Field concludes that although we may not be able to equate a term from one theory with a term from another it does not follow that meaning or denotation is relative to theory or “conceptual scheme”. Later theories can partially refer to the same things that earlier theories referred to while they change and refine our concept of those things. Hartry Field, *Truth and the Absence of Fact* (Oxford university Press, 2001), pp-191-192.

speaker may “have” a word in the sense of possessing normal ability to use it in discourse, and not know the mechanism of reference of that term, explicitly or even implicitly.”²⁹⁷ The meaning of a word like “gold” depends on the nature of the referent and not on the speaker’s potentially ignorant conception of the referent. This is the “contribution of the environment” to the meaning of our terms. Both principles complement each other by allowing the mechanism of reference to keep us in touch with reality’s intrinsic nature despite the fact that we refer to that nature “often under unfruitful and foolish descriptions.”

Causal realism is intended to do justice to the realist intuition that truth is an extra-theoretic notion. It is meant to explain how our descriptions are of “some fixed realm of theory-independent entities” so that what is true remains independent of what is warranted within a particular theory. For realists like the early Putnam, it is the existence of this ontological realm of theory-independent entities (the full nature of which is not immediately apparent to us) that explains the need for our ongoing scientific investigation. Rorty dismisses causal realism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* because he regards it as unnecessary. Rorty argues that trying to pinpoint what we are really talking about across different theories is always just “a matter of “placing” the relative ignorance of the person being described in the context of the relatively greater knowledge claimed by the speaker”.²⁹⁸ What we are talking about is always relative to our current best theory and that theory may still completely fail to correspond to reality. A classic example of a failed theory is phlogiston theory which posited a chemical element that turned out not to exist. According to Rorty, in light of such failures, the positing of a mechanism of reference that keeps us in touch with the

²⁹⁷ Hilary Putnam, “Language and Reality” in *Mind Language and Reality*, *Philosophical Papers Vol.*, p. 278.

²⁹⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 292.

intrinsic nature of reality throughout changes of theory is just a philosophical ploy designed to refute the sceptic. At the end of his discussion of Putnam's theory of reference in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty remarks approvingly that Putnam has largely renounced his earlier position. As we have seen, Rorty's and Putnam's reasons for dissatisfaction with causal realism go deeper than a belief that "reference" is merely a term of philosophical art used to refute the sceptic. They both come to doubt that it makes sense to think of reality as having an intrinsic nature in the first place. The later Putnam argues that we cannot think of reality as being divided into intrinsic parts because we can have incompatible conceptions of reality that are equally correct (what he calls "equivalent descriptions"). It might be possible to believe that it is "a property of THE WORLD itself that it admits of these different mappings" but:

The problem – as Nelson Goodman has been emphasizing for many, many years – is that this story may retain THE WORLD but at the price of giving up any intelligible notion of *how* THE WORLD is.”²⁹⁹

If standards of correctness are theory-relative then the idea that they correspond to reality's intrinsic nature does not make sense. Talk of these theories as descriptions of reality's intrinsic nature is empty.³⁰⁰ As I have stated, Putnam tends to use examples of descriptions that do not necessarily require a realistic interpretation. His examples tend to come from logic, mathematics and quantum mechanics. Nevertheless, the above quote shows that Putnam adopts this position in sympathy with Nelson

²⁹⁹ This and the preceding quote are from Hilary Putnam "Realism and Reason" in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 132.

³⁰⁰ Hilary Putnam "Realism and Reason" in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 133.

Goodman. In his book *Ways of Worldmaking* Goodman describes the practice of “worldmaking” as one in which unique versions of the world are continually generated according to rules that have no regard for reality’s intrinsic nature. Goodman associates the notion of reality’s intrinsic nature with the notion of a neutral God’s-Eye conception of it and argues that our inability to avoid the practice of representation renders the notion of reality’s intrinsic nature redundant. Goodman argues that we ought to abandon the idea that there is a “way the world is” apart from the versions that we create. Once again our inability to achieve a neutral God’s-Eye view of reality that is free of the practice of representation forces reality’s intrinsic nature to drop out of the picture and we are consigned to the apparent world.

Putnam’s endorsement of Goodman’s argument marks a radical departure from his earlier causal realist position because it completely undermines the idea that there are intrinsic parts of reality that remain constant referents of our terms throughout changes of theory. It effectively eliminates the contribution of the environment to the meaning of our terms. There is no fixed realm of theory independent entities that we are in touch with via a mechanism of correspondence. What we are talking about is always relative to our current best theory and that theory may turn out to be complete fantasy and fail to correspond to reality at all. In Putnam’s earlier work, natural kinds are thought to exemplify the sorts of theory-independent entities in question. In *Ways of Worldmaking* Goodman insists that there are no such things. There are only “relevant” kinds:

Induction requires taking some classes to the exclusion of others as relevant kinds [...] The uniformity of nature we marvel at or the

unreliability we protest belongs to a world of our own making.³⁰¹

Similarly to Nietzsche in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense”, Goodman portrays nature as lacking any intrinsic structure. It is us who create that structure through the practice of worldmaking. We classify things independently of any intrinsic order that they may have.³⁰² Kinds only exist by virtue of our attempt to classify.³⁰³ There is no intrinsic structure that we are attempting to accurately represent. We saw that the early Nietzsche was led to this conclusion by assuming that in order for us to capture reality’s intrinsic nature we would need to transcend the practice of representation. We would need to stop representing things and allow reality’s intrinsic nature to confront us in an absolute sense. This assumption also seems to be at play in Goodman’s argument:

We cannot test a version by comparing it with a world undescribed, undepicted, unperceived [...] all we learn about the world is contained in right versions of it; and while the underlying world, bereft of these, need not be denied to those who love it, it is perhaps on the whole a world well lost.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett, 1978), p. 10.

³⁰² The identification of natural kind reasoning with a form of enumerative induction is part of the problem here. When we assert that something is of a particular natural kind we are not just asserting that - as far as we have observed - all particulars of that kind share certain characteristics that we deem relevant. We are asserting that particulars of that kind share certain characteristics that are *intrinsic and essential* to all particulars of that kind regardless of what we deem relevant (or how many we have observed). On this point see James Robert Brown, *Smoke and Mirrors: How Science Reflects Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 133-136. Also see Christopher Norris, *New Idols of the Cave: On the Limits of Anti-Realism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 202-248.

³⁰³ Putnam makes a similar point in “Why There Isn’t a Ready Made World” when he states that “salience and relevance are attributes of thought and reasoning, not of nature.” See Hilary Putnam, “Why There Isn’t a Ready Made World”, in *Realism and Reason, Philosophical Papers, volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 205-228, p. 215.

³⁰⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett, 1978), p. 4.

Goodman argues that reality's intrinsic nature can only be conceived of as something that belies our representations. It is something that can only be known by transcending the practice of representation in familiar Platonic fashion. The problem is that we have no way of achieving such transcendence (assuming the notion makes any sense) and so reality's intrinsic nature is "a world well lost". It is this conviction that unites Rorty, the early Nietzsche, Goodman and the later Putnam.

The idea that our representations could all turn out to be complete fantasy and fail to correspond to reality is telling because in order to argue that one would have to assume that reality's intrinsic nature does not already appear in our representations. This is a thought that Putnam captures in his claim that "the most important consequence of metaphysical realism is that *truth* is supposed to be *radically non-epistemic* - we might be "brains in a vat" and so the theory that is "ideal" from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, "plausibility", "simplicity", "conservatism", etc., *might be false*."³⁰⁵ Realism depends on reality's independence from our representations and this independence raises the possibility that our representations might completely fail to correspond to reality. Putnam's internal realism is an attempt to overcome such doubts by challenging reality's independence from our representations. He prefers not to make a distinction between our representations and reality and claims that the notion of reality's intrinsic nature ought to be disposed of. A similar disposal is at work in Goodman's ambiguous concept of "worldmaking" in which reality is not distinguished from the worlds that we make. But why would we doubt that our representations are able to correspond to

³⁰⁵ Hilary Putnam "Realism and Reason" in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 125.

reality's intrinsic nature in the first place? Rorty argues that Plato can take a lot of the blame for this because he chose to use the concept of representation in order to describe our cognition. At least the assumptions behind Plato's attitude to our representations can be blamed (assumptions that Rorty repeats and reinforces). Those assumptions hold that the contingencies involved in the practice of representation cast grave doubt on the idea that our representations correspond to reality's intrinsic nature. This doubt is fuelled by the idea that our conception of reality's intrinsic nature ought to be an absolute conception. This idea gives traction to the sceptic's claim that any contingency or fallibility in our representations is cause for concern. Such scepticism is compounded by the realization that the demand for an absolute God's Eye view of reality is untenable. Our representations cannot attain the kind of absolute identity with reality that such a demand requires. The intrinsic nature of reality is not available to us in that way. The way reality appears to us is relative to our representations. As I have argued, however, the fact that reality appears to us relative to our representations does not mean that reality's intrinsic nature necessarily fails to correspond to those representations. A representation does not need to be identical to its object in order to correspond to it. Reality's intrinsic nature need not be thought of as something that is misrepresented by our representations. The uniformity of nature need not be thought of as "something of our own making" even though it only appears to us through our representations.

So where does this leave Putnam's realism? We have seen that his earlier causal realist position was intended to explain how it is that the intrinsic nature of reality need not be thought of as something that is misrepresented by our representations. According to causal realism, reality comprises a fixed realm of

theory-independent entities that we refer to while our conception of those entities may vary and change. As a result, the meanings of our terms are not relative to our current theory. The later Putnam, however, argues that the intrinsic nature of reality is something that can only be misrepresented by our representations. He argues that we require a single, neutral and absolute conception of such a nature and the fact that we describe reality in different ways means that the notion of it having an intrinsic nature makes no sense. For example, the fact that I can choose to describe reality either from a microphysical perspective or a macrophysical perspective casts doubt on the claim that those descriptions capture reality's intrinsic nature. I have tried to show that a better alternative is to challenge the notion that we require a single, neutral God's-Eye conception of reality's intrinsic nature. By avoiding that wrong turn we can preserve the idea that reality comprises a fixed realm of theory-independent parts that correspond to our representations. The fact that we represent reality as having different sets of parts is not necessarily a problem if we accept that reality's intrinsic nature is extensive enough to comprise those parts. We can accept this by recognizing the fact that no single representation captures reality absolutely. In order to get a complete conception of reality we need numerous different representations or "right versions" in Goodman's vocabulary. The fact that we have lots of right versions does not mean that we are consigned to an "apparent world" from which reality's intrinsic nature is absent.

I began this part of the chapter by asking how we can know if our cookie cutter cuts reality the joints? I would argue that it is a loaded question. It implies that we have a reason to suspect that we may be "brains in a vat". This is a concern that Rorty reinforces even while dismissing it:

To discover, as a result of the next scientific revolution, that there are no genes, molecules, electrons, etc., but only space-time bumps, or hypnotic suggestions from the Galactic hypnotists who have manipulated our scientists since the time of Galileo, or whatever, would still not put us out of touch with either the world or our ancestors.³⁰⁶

Here Rorty denies that we are out of touch with reality while using a bizarre counterfactual hypothesis to claim that the existence of genes, molecules and electrons could still turn out to be false. I have tried to show that such extreme scepticism is unwarranted. Where our ongoing inquiries are concerned, the fact that our descriptions are fallible is no reason to suppose that they may all completely fail to correspond to reality. The virtue of Putnam's earlier causal realism is that it shows how such fallibility need not be an encouragement to scepticism but an encouragement to revise and improve our representations. Our fallible theories might sometimes fail to refer to an intrinsic part of reality (like phlogiston theory) but that does not make scepticism inevitable. Cases like phlogiston cast doubt on the idea that there is mechanism of reference that always keeps us in touch with the intrinsic nature of reality. Not all of the things that we talk about are necessarily intrinsic parts of reality, but that is not a reason to worry that all of them are "mere appearance". The virtue of Putnam's causal realism is that it conceives of reality as a fixed realm of theory-independent parts that is not completely mysterious. Reality is not a mystery in the sense of being something that belies appearances. It is a mystery in the sense of being something that is not fully apparent to us. This explains the ongoing need to

³⁰⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p286.

test, revise and multiply our representations so that we can better understand reality.

It seems to me that our attempt to understand “the relation between representation and represented” is a crucial part of the ongoing attempt to better understand reality. Rorty’s aversion to such theories of representation is rooted in his dogmatic conception of the kind of account that such “epistemology” strives to give. On his reading, epistemology tries to offer a “neutral scheme [...] which would make Aristotle and Newton, for example, commensurable”³⁰⁷ Such a scheme would offer a neutral view in which proponents of different theories can describe reality so that (in Thomas Kuhn’s words) “what changes with a paradigm is only the scientist’s interpretation of observations that themselves are fixed once and for all by the nature of the environment”³⁰⁸ The problem with attempting to provide such a scheme is that there is no neutral God’s Eye view. The proponents of different paradigms “see different things” and “though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world.”³⁰⁹ In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty is careful to distance himself from an idealist or anti-realist interpretation of such claims:

[Kuhn] let his notion of what counted as a “philosophical paradigm” be set by the Kantian notion that the only substitute for a realistic account of successful mirroring was an idealistic account of the malleability of the mirrored world.³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 323.

³⁰⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 120.

³⁰⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 120-121.

³¹⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 325.

Despite Rorty's intention to distance himself from this philosophical paradigm, however, we have seen that his argument often emulates it. His decision to dismiss realism on the basis that we cannot attain a neutral God's-Eye view of "the thing in-itself" is typical of that philosophical paradigm. It leads him to argue that something like idealism is necessary because the only substitute for a realistic account of "successful mirroring" is an anti-realist account of the malleability of the "linguistic world". I have tried to argue that a better alternative is to deny that realism requires the absolutism that Rorty claims that it demands. It is possible to have a nuanced approach to realism that accepts the impossibility of transcending the practice of representation. We can appreciate the contingencies that characterise our representations without having to deny that reality appears in those representations or that more accurate forms of representation should be one of our goals.

Conclusion

In the introduction I stated that the main concern of my thesis would be Rorty's anti-representationalism. The main concern would be to examine the arguments that Rorty offers in support of his rejection of the concept of representation. I have argued that Rorty's argument relies on a particularly narrow conception of what representationalism must entail. Rorty interprets representationalism as an attempt to provide a guarantee that our representations correspond to reality. This "unintelligible kind of certainty" (to use Putnam's phrase) would be a "God's-Eye" view of reality that provided us with an independent confirmation of the accuracy of our representations. It is unintelligible because it would require a form of representation that transcends the contingencies involved in the practice of representation. It would require a form of representation that is identical to reality in an absolute sense. On Rorty's reading it would be a single and exclusive form of representation that rendered all other possible forms of representation false or "mere appearance". It would reduce reality to a single conception of it and would privilege that conception as if it captured the "essence" of reality. This is not something that we can have because the mind is not a mirror that simply reflects reality without imposing a particular form, perspective, history or practical interest. In William James' famous words "the trail of the human serpent is over everything". Indeed, Rorty's rejection of the concept of representation can be seen to derive its inspiration from James' rejection of the idea that our thoughts "copy" reality as if our best science had

“deciphered the eternal thoughts of the Almighty”.³¹¹ When Rorty seeks to debunk the idea that our language corresponds to reality he often argues along similar lines to James - as if language would have to be “identical either with God or with the world as God’s project” in order to correspond to reality. As far as Rorty is concerned, our inability to “copy” or “mirror” an independent reality in this identical fashion rules out realism from a philosophical point of view. As a result, a philosophical demand for such realism can only leave us dogged by scepticism and the concern that our minds might not correspond to reality at all. Representationalism locks philosophy into an interminable struggle to refute scepticism through the provision of an impossible certainty and the only way out is to reject representationalism.

From within representationalism and realism, Rorty never questions the philosophical need to refute scepticism through the provision of an independent guarantee. He often deploys a form of commonsense (or perhaps “naïve”) realism that eschews the need to refute scepticism. However, he tends to regard this ordinary discourse as uninteresting from a philosophical point of view. Rorty’s conception of what realist and representationalist philosophy entails is very dogmatic. Putnam identifies Rorty’s attitude towards such philosophy as being “scornful”. This is something that Putnam perceives to be a fundamental difference between him and Rorty:

I do not think our reaction to the failure of a philosophical project – even a project as central as “metaphysics” – should be to abandon ways of

³¹¹ William James, “What Pragmatism Means” in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 33.

talking and thinking which have practical and spiritual weight. [...] And I think that what is important in philosophy is not just to say, “I reject the realist/antirealist controversy,” but to show that (and how) both sides *misrepresent* the lives we live with our concepts.³¹²

Putnam argues that the failure of our philosophical attempts to provide an independent guarantee of our realism should not lead us to abandon realist or representationalist philosophy. It should be an indication that our philosophical understanding of realism and representationalism needs to be rectified. This is something that Nietzsche seems to have understood as he was motivated to conceive of a form of realism and representationalism that does not require the kind of absolutism that realism seemed to him (early on at least) to require. After articulating his misgivings about such absolutist realism in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” Nietzsche gradually re-thought the appearance-reality distinction. His perspectivism is a theory of representation that attempts to formulate a less absolutist form of realism – one that challenges the Platonic dichotomy between appearance and reality. In Adorno’s terms, it conceives of reality as something that exceeds any single representation of it and shows why the ideal of a single identical “mirror-like” representation of reality is unintelligible. Reality’s intrinsic nature is not something that can be absolutely identified with a single representation of it. We can have numerous different perspectives and forms of representation that capture reality’s intrinsic nature. Given the contingencies involved in the practice of representation there may be an inexhaustible number of ways that the nature of reality could be captured. We see this in contemporary statistical analysis, for example, in which data is selected and

³¹² Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 20.

presented in myriad different ways in order to illustrate different trends. There is no single absolute reflection of what is going on. The point is to avoid restricting our conception of what a realistic representation is to the kind of mirror imagery that implies that the correspondence between a representation and reality requires that the representation “reflects” or “copies” reality in an absolute, exclusive, neutral or passive way.

One of the things that characterises the practical and spiritual weight of realism is that it provides a counter weight to solipsism and idealism. Realism captures our sense that the world is not identical to our minds or our language. The world is something that we can be wrong about and that we have to get right in order to be successful. We have seen that there are a number of parallels between Rorty’s anti-representationalism and idealism. There is no sense for Rorty in which reality is something that we have to get right. This standard of correctness or accuracy goes when realism and representationalism go. In the field of natural science or in the exploration of our own personal identity there is nothing to get right in this sense, as far as Rorty is concerned. There are just conventional “language-games” that can be changed if need be. I have argued that Rorty is wrong to throw out the language of realism and representationalism on the narrow terms that he does. The fact that we cannot transcend our minds or language in order to get independent confirmation of their accuracy is not sufficient reason to abandon accuracy as a standard. It just requires us to re-conceive that accuracy using something other than an idealized notion of correspondence. There is fertile ground within representationalism for the development of forms of realism that do not rely on the terms that Rorty sets for it. One of the examples that I have given is Roy Bhaskar’s realist theory of science.

Bhaskar eschews the need to assure ourselves that any part of our science corresponds to reality absolutely. For him, realism simply involves an acknowledgement that the purpose of science is to represent reality accurately. Hilary Putnam's early causal realism also eschews the kind of absolutism that Rorty associates with realism. He asserts the existence of a "fixed realm of theory-independent entities" that our language is intended to refer to while his principles of Benefit of Doubt and Reasonable Ignorance both acknowledge the potential fallibility of our current conception of those entities.

Rorty might argue that the problem of scepticism will remain a problem no matter how we pursue representationalism. It will always place us at a remove from reality and raise the concern that our representations might completely fail to correspond to reality. However, scepticism is more problematic the more inevitable we make it. The problem with Rorty's account of realism and representationalism is that it makes scepticism unavoidable. Rorty restricts realism to a demand for an independent guarantee of correspondence. This is not just an attempt to make sense of the relationship of correspondence. According to Rorty, without an independent God's-Eye view we must give up on realism. The inevitability of scepticism then provides impetus for Rorty's rejection of the whole notion of representation. In contrast, I have tried to show that if we adopt a less absolute form of realism then scepticism loses traction. Reality can be thought to appear in our representations despite the contingency of those representations. The key is to avoid thinking of reality as something that needs to be reduced to a single, absolute representation of it. The notion that realism must either demand an absolute representation of reality or concede the argument to the sceptic is not the *fait accompli* that Rorty insists that it is.

The contingencies involved in the practice of representation need not cast doubt on our realism. This is not just a question of naively ignoring scepticism but of developing a better comprehension of “the relationship between representation and represented”. This is a comprehension of that relationship that does not rely on a narrow notion of representation (or correspondence) as a form of “mirroring” in which reality is “reflected” in a neutral or non-perspectival way. It is a form of representationalism that has learnt the lessons of pragmatism (for example) without abandoning ways of thinking and talking that are spiritually and practically important to us. In Rorty’s own words, it aims at “a still better, more luminously convincing, more transparent philosophical account of representation.”

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